

A New Life

A Novel

By

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A New Life

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*"I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
Of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
To allow my living to open me,
To make me less afraid,
More accessible,
To loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance;
To live
so that which comes to me as seed
Goes to the next as blossom
And that which comes
to me as blossom, goes on as fruit."*

~ Dawna Markova

RESURRECTION

I leaned over the railing of the McCormick Bridge and looked at the water far below. Oddly enough, I didn't feel fear of dying, of having my body become lifeless in the dark waters of the river. I figured I'd be found downstream in the morning, caught by a tree branch or some snag in the river until some misfortunate soul saw me. I'd have a quiet and respectable funeral and then be forgotten: unknown as I came into this world, and unknown as I left.

My biggest fear was of living, of having to come to grips with the parts of life that scared me most. I could barely think of them all. At thirty two, I'd had ample time to prove that I had the courage to live day to day, to build a career, to have a family, to find love, to self actualize. When I looked at myself in the mirror, something I'd done more often over the past months, I found failure and frustration on all fronts. Somehow, I just couldn't measure up to the yardstick I'd set for myself so many years ago.

I had lots of excuses and rationalizations. I'd been raised a 'momma's boy,' I had a strict upbringing, my punishments as a child were severe, my family was poor, and I couldn't

afford to go to college, girls found me remote and unapproachable, I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, I went to the wrong school, I couldn't find Jesus – or he couldn't find me, and on and on. My list was endless, and I was creative about thinking up new ones. I'd been born thirty-two years ago to the day – Scott Allistair Dartford. My initials depressed me since I learned the meaning of the word: SAD.

My parents were older, and both smoked; they were dead just before I turned eighteen and graduated high school. I'd worked to support the family since I'd been twelve, so I just kept working at menial jobs. In one sense, I grew up fast. I learned that to keep a roof over my head and food on the table, I had to work. When I graduated high school, I didn't know much about money, but a year later I did. I ran up a huge credit card debt in that year which took me another six years to pay off. As immature as I was, I did manage to keep my parent's house and eat.

I met a few girls I liked and would have liked to pursue, however, I was so shy and lacking self-confidence that the thought of asking any of them out petrified me. I know they flirted with me, but I just couldn't bring myself to respond. I became cold and numb over time, and what one girl called unapproachable. I tried to live my life in a way that didn't put me in contact with many women. My father warned off girls as a teen, and I saw no reason to change until it was too late and I wanted somebody else in my life.

I had a couple of superficial friendships with guys I worked with. We'd laugh or joke around, but we didn't socialize very much outside work. I perpetuated the reputation I'd developed as a recluse – a hermit living in the middle of a small North Carolina town.

One thing I was good at was reading and learning things. I was a voracious reader. My parents had a great library, and I read every book in it. They'd encouraged me to use the public library, and over the years devoured many of their volumes. On weekends I'd sometimes drive to Charlotte or Winston Salem and go to a bookstore, the kind with easy chairs where you can take a book, read all day, and the people that work there don't care. I'd sleep in the car Saturday night, and Saturday and Sunday I'd often read a dozen books before I headed home. I even read a book on suicide called *Final Exit*.

After many weeks of soul searching, an exercise that I found depressing, I decided to end this life, hoping that I might find solace in death and perhaps even in resurrection in some other life, some other form, and some other body. I made decisions with some deliberation and often considered them from many different perspectives over a period of time. The decision to end my life was no exception. After I'd clearly described my decision, I started to mull over the consequences of doing or not doing the act. As each day went by, I tested my thinking and logic. In the end, my mind had not changed. I could not stand to face this world alone any further: no self-esteem, no friends, no lover. The decision was made.

With the same sense of thoroughness, I wrote an explanation of why I was ending my life and how I wanted my assets disposed of. I prepared a will, copying a form I found on the Internet. I wanted the house to go to someone that would take care of it the way I had, preferably to some charity that could make good use of it. My library and a few thousand dollars in a bank account, I wanted to go to a charity dealing with education; helping people learn and advance more than I did in my short life; helping people avoid going down the dead-end street I'd found myself on. The few other assets someone would figure out what to do with: my car, the lawnmower, and the well-worn furniture I'd inherited and never changed. I hoped the authorities would honor my wishes, but I wouldn't be around to care.

Now all that was left was to jump. My body would most likely hit the water at an angle. I'd be traveling over a hundred miles an hour by that point; however, I'd come to a stop in a fraction of a second. In that deceleration many of my organs would rupture or tear loose from their supports; ribs would fracture and pierce my heart, lungs and other organs. Severe internal bleeding would commence if I weren't dead already. I might plunge deeper into the river, shattering my body further on the granite boulders under water. 'Death by bridge' is an unpleasant way to die however, for the jumper it is nearly instantaneous – you die in that fraction of a second when you hit the water, or you immediately lose consciousness and die of internal hemorrhages before you wake up.

Thus, I found myself in the middle of the bridge, sucking in one of my last breaths of air. I rehearsed my demise: legs over the concrete railing, stand on the outside cornice running the length of the bridge, count to ten, and step off feet first into the abyss of darkness below me. I found something comforting knowing that it was almost twelve o'clock.

I hadn't heard anyone come near me. Midnight on the edge of town is not a place you'd normally expect walkers or joggers to be evident. So I reacted with surprise and a shudder of fear when I heard the young woman's voice: "Hello. Can you help me? My car died just off the far end of the bridge. It won't start."

She stood a dozen feet from me; her pocketbook clutched in one hand. The lights on each end of the bridge gave enough light for me to see her features. She was pretty, in her mid or late twenties, with brunette hair. She was dressed nicely, obviously coming from a party of some kind, yet she had a palpable innocence about her. She didn't seem scared of being alone or talking to me at midnight. On some other occasion, I might have been suspicious, afraid she'd have some accomplice that would beat and rob me, and then leave me for dead along the side of the road. I laughed at the thought; that was why I was here tonight.

I responded automatically, "I'd be delighted to help." At least I could be civil and even charming in these last minutes of my life. I thought I'd help her and then come back to the bridge and complete my mission.

She came closer and shook my hand with small town familiarity: “Thank you so much. My name is Allison – Allison Millman.” She paused and studied me, however, any conclusion she reached remained unspoken. Instead, she talked about the car as we started walking in the direction she indicated; he heels clicking on the pavement. “I was on my way home from a birthday party for someone in my department – at the paper mill, and I crossed the bridge about a half hour ago or maybe a little longer. Just as I got to the end, the engine stopped running. I managed to steer it to the side of the road and leave the blinkers on. The battery seems all right. I tried to start it a number of times, but I was afraid I might have flooded it, so I waited for a while before trying again, but no luck. I just bought the car yesterday; it ran so well when I test drove it, and even today when I went to work and did errands; now this – at midnight, of course. So I knew I had to leave the car and walk somewhere to find help. I thought I had a better chance of finding a house with someone still awake on the other side of the bridge. That’s where I was headed when I saw you – my savior.” She smiled at me.

“I’m Scott. I was just out for a walk,” I lied. “I have a lot on my mind and thought a walk would clear my head.” That statement was partly true, and I didn’t think I should burden a stranger with the fact that she had disturbed me from severing ties with this world.

I fell into step beside her as she led the way back to her car. As we neared the end of the bridge and left the sidewalk, Allison took my arm: “The shoulder of the road is a little rocky and I have heels on, not the things to be wearing traipsing around in the dark.” She was right; there wasn’t much light as we got away from the bridge. I could see the taillights of her car up far ahead, the emergency flashers working efficiently.

Allison said, “I’ve never had this happen before. I always thought I was so self-sufficient, but then something like this happens. I know nothing about cars other than ... well, you know, how to drive one, but certainly nothing about repairing one.”

She had a cheery and uplifting voice, and talked in a way that telegraphed her excitement about life. She babbled on about how she walked back and studied me for a moment before asking me for help. “My mom is always telling me to never talk to strangers – since I was two years old. But, I like talking to people, even strangers. Anyway, I looked at you for a few minutes and decided you were a kind person. Moreover, you’re a guy and *all* guys know something about fixing cars.” She laughed at her exaggeration so much that I had to join in with her. She paused and decided to test her thesis. “You do know something about fixing cars, don’t you?” She asked in a mocking tone. Even in the dim light I could see a smile on her face from ear to ear.

“I know a little,” I admitted. “I worked for a few years doing auto repair.”

Allison chortled with joy and hugged my arm to her, “Oh, I knew I’d been led to find the right guy. The universe always helps me when I need it most.”

I laughed in turn at her enthusiasm, “Well, let’s see. Don’t get your hopes up too high. We might need tools or something we don’t have to fix it.” I thought for a moment and asked, “How far are you from home?”

She pointed along the road and said, “About three miles that way. I live in the apartments at Farmhouse Crossing. I’ve been there a year.” She studied me and asked, “Do you live around here? I didn’t see a car so you must have walked.”

I gestured back over the bridge, “I live about a mile back, off to the left a couple of hundred yards past the bridge. It’s one of the old houses near the orchard. I’ve lived there all my life.”

She asked, “Do you live alone? Are you married?”

“No, just me and the house. It gets kind of lonely sometimes. I’m a bit of a hermit, although I’ve wished it were otherwise. That’s part of what I was thinking about on the bridge.”

“But you’re so nice,” Allison insisted. She added, “And you don’t seem like a hermit to me. Hermits don’t help people, and I’m so grateful for your help at this strange hour.” She paused and added, “I’ve felt like I wanted to be a hermit sometimes, particularly when something scares me. The past year has been like that for me.” I tried to look at her in the dim light to see if I could read more about what she meant by her remark.

We’d slowed our pace as we started to talk, plus the road got so dark it was impossible to see where we were putting our feet.

I said, “I let some fears spoil my life; I think we all have some things we’d like to hide from. I have a lot of past regrets, sins of omission.”

Allison asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“Things I wish I’d done when I was younger but didn’t.” I paused and went on, “I seem to be able to rationalize things away now – you know, make up excuses for how I’ve turned out. I wish I could have changed when I was younger.”

“But you’re still young,” She stated emphatically. “You can still do anything you want to do.”

“But I didn’t go to college. I stopped after high school. My parents had both died. I took over the house, but I had to work to keep things going – to live. I was scared of girls, so I never went out with anyone. I always thought a nice girl would want someone smart and educated. I took a couple of courses at the community college, but knew I’d never get a degree, so eventually, I just gave up. There aren’t many great jobs around here without a

degree. I have some computer skills, but around here no employer values them. I'm between jobs now, in fact." The latter was my polite way of saying I'd been out of work for three months, scrapping by doing odd jobs off the grid.

"You could still get a degree. I just saw where some great-grandmother finished her college degree and got her diploma. I think she was in her eighties. It's never too late to go to school."

"What would I do for money? I'd have to work," I said.

"There are lots of options. I worked at my school. I had a job as a residence hall advisor that gave me free room and board. I also worked in the library at the reference desk and that helped me earn enough for spending money. My parents helped with what they could. The rest I did on a student loan; two more years and I'll have paid it off. I could have paid it off already, but the interest rate is so low my friends all told me to take my time."

We reached the car about that time. It was an older model Honda Prelude. I'd worked on cars like this before, and some of the specs came back to me. I opened the hood, and the little interior light over the engine came on.

I said to Allison, "Try to start it while I watch what's happening up here."

She responded and cranked the engine, allowing it to turn over a few times.

"OK," I yelled. "Turn it off and wait for me to tell you to try again." She acknowledged my request and got out of the car. She came and stood beside me.

I pulled the air cleaner from the carburetor and saw the problem right away. I laughed.

"Allison, how long had this car sat unused before you bought it?"

"Well, as I said, I just got it yesterday. I don't know how long it was unused. I bought it from a man on one of the farms east of town."

I picked at the inside of the air cleaner. Not only was the air cleaner almost totally clogged with dust and grime, a family of mice had decided the air cleaner made precisely the right home. They'd assembled an odd assortment of paper and cloth scraps, bits of grain, and left a copious quantity of their calling cards behind. I showed Allison, and she rolled her eyes.

"Do you think it will run now?" She asked.

"Try it," I told her, hopeful that the problem was so simple to solve. I stood there holding the filthy air cleaner assembly in my hands.

She got back in the car and turned the key. On the third crank the engine roared to life. Over the sound of the car, I heard the happiness in her voice: “You’re marvelous. You fixed my car.” I felt an inner pride that I could make her respond with such joy.

She let the car idle and got out. “What about all that?” She asked, pointing to the engine parts in my hands.

“Open the trunk of the car and I’ll set them inside. You can get it cleaned up and get a new air filter tomorrow – or later today,” I added considering the after-midnight hour. She popped the trunk, and I set the air filter inside. As I did I happened to check the spare, something I’d gotten accustomed to doing when I was a mechanic. The spare was soft. I told her, “You should get the whole car serviced. Your spare tire is soft – needs air. I bet this needs servicing badly.”

Allison stood beside me as I closed the trunk. She asked, “If I bring the car to your house, will you do it for me? I need it to commute during the week, but if I could wait for it I’d be eternally grateful. I’ll bake you cookies or bread or fix dinner or something in return.”

I froze. She was trying to make a date with me. She actually wanted to be with me, even in my modest role as a mechanic. But then I remembered, I didn’t expect to eat any more dinners in this world; I’d planned to jump off the McCormick Bridge.

I thought for a long time. The turning point was her volunteering to fix me dinner. Allison studied me, a little smile on her lips. “Please,” she finally said with a pleading voice. “I like you, and I barely know anyone in this whole town. I just want to say ‘thank you.’”

I couldn’t ever remember having a female beg for my company. It felt good. There was no rejection here, quite the opposite. “All right. When? Later today?” We laughed again at the idea that it was the middle of the night.

“Yes,” She said. “But don’t run away now. I want us to go somewhere and have coffee or a beer or something. Will you come with me to the diner out by the Interstate? Please, I’m not ready to sleep and you don’t seem to be either. We can just talk for a while, and then I’ll drop you back at your house.”

She seemed desperate for company – my company, although I secretly knew I was the desperate one between us, so hopeless I’d been seconds from ending my life. I laughed at her pleas, and said, “All right. It’ll give me a chance to ride in your ‘new’ car and see whether I notice anything else wrong with it.” I walked around to the passenger side as Allison got in to drive. Fifteen minutes later we pulled into the parking lot at the diner. About twenty semis were parked, some with their noisy diesels running. Our little Honda looked miniscule beside them as we drove through to our parking space.

Inside we got a booth away from the stream of foot traffic through the place. It was one o'clock in the morning by then. We spent the first few minutes going over the menu figuring out what to have, ultimately settling on an early breakfast.

I knew I was supposed to be conversational, but I had seldom had the opportunity to practice the skill. After the waitress took our order, I said simply, "So, tell me about Allison."

Allison gave me a warm smile and talked, telling me about her life, family, schooling, and work. She was twenty-eight, had grown up outside of Washington, D.C., had a younger sister up there with a new boyfriend, and parents living and working in a Washington suburb. She had a chemistry degree from Pennsylvania State University, and worked doing quality control at the paper mill outside town. Her first job had been at a biotech lab in suburban Washington, but she'd changed jobs to leave the area and start anew about a year earlier. She confessed she'd lived three years with a guy, but then they had a blow-up and things fell apart.

The more Allison talked; the more fascinated I became with her life and her stories. I leaned into every word she said. They rolled from her mouth so effortlessly, and she seemed so willing to share with me. I nodded a lot to encourage her to keep talking, adding in an occasional word or two, such as, "Go on," or "Tell me more." I also found myself smiling and laughing at some of her escapades or girlish adventures. I thought how unlike me I seemed to feel now, as if I'd gone through some kind of metamorphosis.

Our meals arrived, and we toyed with the food as we talked; really as Allison talked and I listened. I wondered where I'd found this new courage to be pleasant with such a nice looking girl. I should have been shy and even grouchy, trying to flee from the situation as soon as I could. Instead, I sat mesmerized by her presence across the Formica table from me.

Eventually, she turned the tables on me and got me talking, initially about being a 'townie' in a two-industry town: paper mill and agriculture. I talked about being an only child of parents that were both only children. I shared my memories of growing up, my parent's long illnesses, the strong physical discipline I'd received, the guilt trips, and then how I took over my own life at seventeen when my mother finally died two years after my father passed, even hiding the fact from the school authorities so I wouldn't have to go to a foster home.

We laughed about my first experiences with credit cards, and how I'd gone 'over the top' with them, buying like there wouldn't be a price to pay. I told her about all the jobs I'd had around town, including jobs at the paper mill, and at the food processing plant down the road.

Allison proved to be good interviewer. She pulled out of me a lot of things I'd felt about my life in this small town, but hadn't wanted to face. I had to admit it had a dead end feel to it,

particularly with the rumors about the paper mill closing. Of course that occupied some of our conversation too since we both had a connection to the mill.

We played a game; Allison called it, ‘Ask Me Something Personal.’ You had to answer the questions truthfully to the best of your ability. She had me start. I asked her, “Wasn’t it hard being in a relationship with her old boyfriend for three years and having it end? What was it like?” I didn’t understand relationships, and here was an opportunity to try to get some perspective on the subject. I thought she’d be mad; instead, she was philosophical.

She started slowly with her answer, “When I first met Adam, he swept me off my feet. He worked at the same company I did, only in a different department. He was older and had his doctorate in biochemistry. We went out a few times, and we fell in love. You know what I mean?”

I stopped her with my hand. I sat erect and said, “Allison, I’ve never been in love. I don’t know what you mean, so please, if you don’t mind, tell me about it. I’ve read about it, but I’ve never talked with anybody about it.”

Allison looked shocked. I think my earlier remarks about not being involved with people finally sunk in. She leaned across the table and said to me thoughtfully, “Falling in love is like having one of the best days of your life, only every day. When it starts, you can’t stand to be away from the person that is the object of your affection, even for a few minutes. You bond with them in so many ways, and on so many levels – intellectually, spiritually, and physically. You want to touch them, to have them touch you, even in your most intimate places – physically and emotionally, and then you don’t want them to ever stop.”

Allison checked with me, and I nodded for her to keep going. “Love makes you feel all warm inside, like sitting by a nice fire on a cold winter day. If it starts slowly, it’s as if you gradually feel the warmth rise in you over days or weeks, until things reach a boiling point. Things get passionate somewhere along the line.” She gave me a shy grin and said, “That’s when the sex starts. You want to do nothing but make love all the time.”

I asked naively, “Did it continue like that for three years?”

Allison giggled, “No, but it certainly was like that for six or nine months. Then, I’d say, we got a handle on it. We couldn’t keep boiling continually, at least Adam couldn’t. We cooled down, but by that time we’d moved in together, or rather I moved in with him. We were just like newly-weds. I mean, even going shopping together was a romantic experience. Living together was a growing experience for both of us. He’d never had a serious girlfriend before.”

“Didn’t you both find you had habits that the other person couldn’t tolerate? What did you do about those?”

Allison again looked puzzled by my question. “You’ve never been in a normal family setting have you?”

I shook my head.

Allison sighed. She was just started to appreciate the depth of what I meant when I told her how out of touch with normal life I’d been. She said, “When you live with someone, even your parents, there are always things they do that you don’t like. You just have to overlook them or ignore them. You love the person, and that gets you past them. You may not like what they do, but you tolerate it. The stuff you can’t tolerate you try to get them to stop.”

She went back to her explanation of her relationship with Adam: “So, to your question, yes, we found we each had little annoying things we did that the other didn’t like – everyone does. Were they show-stoppers? For two years, no, but then we found a few things that spelled out the end of the relationship.”

“Can you say what they were?” I asked with a curious tone. I was exploring new ground.

“Yes,” Allison said, “Getting married, and having children. Those were the two big ones at that point in time. I wanted both, eventually, and Adam wanted neither, ever. He had an anger management problem too. We coasted for a while, and I thought he might change his mind and change his behavior. Then I found a stash of cocaine in his closet one day. We’d agreed on no drugs. Anyway that kind of stuff all led to some big fights, and I ended up moving out.” She paused and looked at me, “Do you do drugs?”

“Years ago, I tried about everything that came through town,” I told her. “The stuff was too expensive and too unfulfilling in the long run. I was barely making enough money to eat, let alone buy that stuff. A guy I worked with at the time OD’d on heroin, and that put an end to me getting any deeper into the drug scene.”

The waitress came and filled our coffee cups again. After she’d left, I asked Allison another question: “Did it hurt to break up? Wasn’t it painful?”

“Yes, it hurt. My ego was bruised because I made a bad decision about being with Adam. I cried; I didn’t like being alone all of a sudden; my self-esteem dropped to an all-time low; and I had to do some things I didn’t like – like move out of Adam’s apartment, and quit my job so I wouldn’t see him anymore.”

“Would you do it again?”

The question stopped Allison. She studied me again and said, “You ask tough questions. And, yes, I think I would, but not with what I know now. Adam was my first serious love

affair. I'm older and wiser, at least I think I am. I'd dated lots of other guys, and even gotten serious about a few, but not like Adam. Somehow, with those relationships, we'd drift into an intimate friendship and then drift out of it. There weren't calamities or drama."

She went on, "Now, I would ask the basic relationship questions much earlier: like how he thought about marriage and kids, his vision of a family, how we'd interact with friends, how we communicate with each other, whether we'd have healthy habits, whether we think about money the same way, and stuff like that. I'd have to know whether to end it sooner. The longer you're in a bum relationship, the harder it is to leave – and the more pain you feel. You avoid the pain, and that last year, I hid from it. I hoped everything would change, but things only got worse. I tried to get Adam to talk about things, but he wouldn't. I even suggested counseling, but he'd have none of it. In the end, I just packed up my things and walked out the door. He wasn't there, and I haven't talked to him since."

I volunteered, "If I met the right girl, I'd marry her, and I like kids too. I don't have any vision of what a family would be like, just what I've read in books. I like to read. From the time I was ten until I was seventeen, there was always a sick or dying parent in the house. That's not a good vision to hold of a family; I need a new one. I don't do drugs any more. I'd need help learning how to be a good friend, and how to be communicative in a relationship."

I stopped myself. Why was I suddenly trying to fill in the blanks on Allison's compatibility factors? I wanted to please her. She was so nice to spend time with me. I realized the time.

"Allison," I exclaimed, "It's three o'clock in the morning. I don't want you to lose your beauty sleep."

She laughed and said, "But I don't want our time together to end. I like you. I like talking with you."

"Me too," I said. "I've never talked like this with any girl – ever."

Allison thought for a minute and said, "I haven't gotten to ask my question in our 'Ask Me Something Personal' game. Are you still up for the game?" She smiled disarmingly at me.

I nodded.

"My question is sort of personal: What were you doing standing in the middle of the bridge over the gorge at midnight? What were you thinking about?"

I pulled away from the table almost as if she smacked me across the face. I'd put aside all the poor feelings I'd had about myself three hours earlier and in the weeks before that night. Allison had pulled me away from that black hole in my life.

I started slowly, “I was depressed. I don’t like my life. I couldn’t see a way out, except ...” My voice tailed off into silence and tears came to my eyes; several rolled down my cheeks.

Allison studied me and asked softly, “Were you going to jump? Did I stop you?”

I nodded slowly. She reached across the table and put her hand on mine.

“I wouldn’t have the courage to do that,” She said. “I’d have to muddle on, or I’d have to change.”

There was a long silence between us.

Allison said to me, “Have you thought about changing? Leaving town? Changing who you are?”

I said, “I don’t see how I could do that. It’s a scary thought, and I’m not good at change. The changes I’d have to make to get my life to where I want it are so large, so scary.”

“Of course it’s possible,” She said with an upbeat to her voice. “I had to do it to come here from Washington. If the paper mill closes, I’ll have to do it again, if not sooner. The thought scares me shitless, but I’ll do it.” She looked at me again and asked, “What’s the first thing about yourself that you’d change ... that would make you feel better about yourself?”

I laughed my depression away and said, “My initials. They’ve haunted me all my life: S.A.D. – sad, unhappy, miserable, gloomy, down, blue – all negative things I’ve lived with for almost my whole life. For me, my initials say it all.”

“So, change your name?”

“Huh?”

Allison laughed at my stunned look and said, “Change you name. It’s easy. You go to the courthouse and tell them what you want to be called. They give you piece of paper that says ‘OK’ and that’s the end of it. What name would you pick – or initials?”

We spent a few minutes thinking up names and initials, writing things down on one paper napkin after another. Soon, we had the waitress and then the short order cook helping. The criteria Allison announced was that the initials had to have a ‘positive’ tone to them, as well as each of the names. Some of the initial candidates provoked a good laugh from each of us, including SEX and FUK. The serious contenders when we’d finished all the three letter combinations we could think of were FUN, JOY, NOW, OPT, PEP, and TRY.

The winner of our three-letter initial contest was the one that felt to me furthest away from the word 'SAD,' thus, 'JOY' won out over all the others. It felt uplifting and even spiritual to me, full of pleasure and happiness, including fun and pep. It would be a constant reminder to change my outlook on life

I had always liked the name 'Joel' and so that became my new first name. The blond Swedish waitress suggested that I adopt 'Odin' as my new middle name. Odin was the Scandinavian name for the supreme God and creator, as well as the God of victory. Allison picked my new last name – 'Young' as a reminder that I should remain forever youthful in my outlook on life and in my curiosity about life.

Thus, about four o'clock in the morning, in the Interstate Diner, I became 'Joel Odin Young;' with the initials J.O.Y. The rest would be just some paperwork to make things formal. I actually cried as though I was being born again. Allison again held my hand until I regained control of myself.

Allison leaned across the table and kissed my cheek. "I am so proud of you," She said with a smile that beamed from ear to ear. I actually felt proud of myself too, an amazing emotion rare in my life. The waitress actually kissed my cheek too. I blushed a dozen shades of purple, and the women laughed.

After that, Allison continued to hold my hand across the table, a gesture that got a large smile from the waitress. We had more coffee.

The next topic of conversation Allison posed by asking me, "What would you do starting tomorrow if money were no object?"

I knew the answer to that, and it did involve money. I told her, "I'd go to college and get a degree."

The discussion that followed touched on my motivation and why that was so important to me. She retraced some of our earlier discussion about working my way through college, and she also mentioned how I might be able to get some credit for my experience and for the many books I told her I'd read, some of them the classics. We talked about where I'd go, and I told her I'd be content with the state university, if I could get in. The University of North Carolina was based in Chapel Hill, about a hundred miles away.

"What would you do with the house?" She asked.

I sighed and said, "I really have no roots here. There's no family or close friends – except you." I was feeling bold and gave her a wink. "I'd sell the place if anyone would want it. I've kept it in good shape since I inherited it."

“Later today, will you show it to me? Maybe when you work on my car?”

“My pleasure. Don’t get your hopes up; it’s a pretty modest house. The other thing is that property values will drop around here if the mill closes. Now would be the time to sell, or else wait a hundred years and see whether things improve.”

We both ordered some cinnamon buns for a real breakfast as the sun came up, the first rays shining in the other end of the diner from where we sat. We’d been together most of the night. I was surprised when I thought back over all the subjects we’d talked about, and how much about ourselves we’d shared.

Allison asked quietly, “You won’t go back to the bridge will you? It’d break my heart to lose you so soon after I found you.”

I shook my head and said quietly, “No, you’ve turned me around.” I looked at her a long time and then said something I couldn’t imagine ever saying to a girl before that morning, “Besides, I’ve found you too. I just hope you don’t disappear on me. I’m ... well, I really like you. I hope we can spend more time together.”

She smiled at me and nodded enthusiastically to show she felt the same way. She squeezed the hand she’d been holding in hers so I got the message loud and clear. Her hand was warm and so nice to touch.

We finally left the diner six hours after we entered. It was Saturday morning.

Allison drove to her apartment to change and shower. While I waited for her, I stretched out in her living room chair and got too comfortable: I fell asleep. She woke me up a little later looking perky and bright eyed, wearing pastel Bermuda shorts and a short-sleeve summer top with Nikes on her feet. She had a college sweatshirt wrapped around her shoulders. She’d also put her hair into a ponytail and pulled it through the back of a light blue Tar Heels baseball cap. She looked very preppy. She’d kissed me on the cheek to wake me up, a kiss that had a delicious feeling to it.

We swung by the auto parts store, and I picked up some oil, an air filter, and a couple of other things I’d need to do a routine maintenance on Allison’s car. She’d come into the store with me, and it felt so special to have her wandering around behind me as I paid for the things. Even the guys behind the counter stared at her; she was a nice looking woman – and she was ‘with’ me.

At my house, I gave her the nickel tour inside, changed into some grubby blue jeans, and then went to work on her car. Allison sat on a small chair she pulled into the yard near where I’d put the car up on blocks. From under the car, I gave her a blow-by-blow description of what I was checking out or doing. I drained the oil and changed the oil filter, checked her

brakes, and a few other things before I pulled out from underneath the vehicle. Up top, I put fresh oil in the engine and checked over everything in more detail, ending by putting the new air filter on the engine. I had a small battery operated air compressor, and my efforts ended by filling all her tires and the spare up to recommended pressures.

I stood and looked at the cute little car, telling her I thought she'd actually done well in the purchase. I volunteered to help her keep it running, if it ever became a problem again.

Allison came and put her arms around my neck and hugged me. My clothing was filthy from being under the car. She moved very close to me and said, "Thank you so much for helping me last night, spending all night with me at the diner, and then working on my car today." She hugged me and gave me a peck on the cheek. She thought better of her reward, and then kissed me on the lips and pulled away.

As we parted, I saw the damage the hug had done to her pastel shorts; "I got your shorts dirty ... oops, and your blouse where I hugged you back. I'm sorry." I would have dusted her clothing off, but my hands were still greasy from working on the car. She laughed and started to walk away, carrying her chair back to the front porch.

Allison looked over her shoulder at me as she walked away; "I'm not," She said with a flirty grin.

My heart was doing flips, and my stomach was in knots. I'd never kissed a girl. I wasn't sure what to do next, but I knew I wanted to do more. I followed her up to the house, went in, and washed my hands.

When I came back outside, Allison was on the settee and motioned for me to come and join her. "Did you mind that I kissed you?" She asked in her flirty voice.

"Not a bit," I replied. "You're the first girl I've kissed. You've scrambled my head – last night, this morning, and then with that kiss." I smiled at her, but behind my smile was a plea for her not to hurt me – not to lead me on to somewhere I didn't want to go or couldn't get back from.

I sat down beside her, leaving a polite gap between us. I put my feet up on the railing of the porch and got too comfortable. Although Allison started to talk about the rest of the day, her voice got further and further away; I fell asleep.

*

"Joel. Hey, Joel. Wake up!" I was being roused by some female voice, but I didn't know any Joel, and I couldn't imagine who was talking. I pulled the cushion on the settee closer to my head.

“Come on, JOEL! We have to go. We slept for five hours. It’s the middle of the afternoon. Joel!” The voice managed to stretch the name Joel into a five-second song. I cranked one eye open to see who was shaking me. A very pretty young woman kneeled next to me on my front porch. She had the prettiest long highlighted brunette hair and blue-green eyes. She was my savior. I really liked her. Allison.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

Allison looked at me with a smile and said, “I have to go to the mill and do some testing for about an hour before the shift changes at four o’clock. I’m filling in for one of the other quality control people this afternoon. Do you want to come? It’s almost three fifteen now.”

I mumbled, “I want to come with you.” I remembered that I needed to clean up before I went. I reminded her, “I need a shower. Can you wait? I won’t be long.”

She nodded, and I shuffled inside the house with Allison holding onto my shoulders and pushing me from behind. She was laughing at how slow I was waking up from my nap. As we walked she kept calling me by my new name – Joel Odin Young. I realized I wasn’t waking up from a nap; I was waking up in a whole new life.

Twenty minutes later I presented myself – shaved, showered, and dressed well - to Allison with a bow. She’d discovered my library and was pouring through books.

“This is the best home library I’ve ever seen,” She said. “How many of these have you read?” She gestured to shelf after shelf of books covering a wide range of topics, both fiction and nonfiction.

“All of them,” I told her with some modesty.

“All of them!” She exclaimed, clearly impressed with the scope of my interests. “You surely won’t have any trouble with college. They should give you some kind of advanced placement for reading all these. I know people with Ph.D.’s that haven’t read this much.”

She went on, “I also peeked at your computer set up in the corner of the living room. That’s a really complex arrangement of computers and screens. I could tell from the pictures you’ve put on the bulletin board that you work at processing digital photographs. You’re good and creative; some of that work is over the top. I mean you could sell it.”

“Yea,” I admitted. “I’m an Internet freak, and I like to find interesting photos and then work them over and make them into something better than they were – even combining them. I like working with computers. I even built the two computers you saw out of scrap parts. I

couldn't afford new ones so I learned how to built fast, complex machines with lots of storage out of what other people were throwing away.”

We left the house behind, and she drove us out State Road 268 to the paper mill. She checked me in as a ‘guest’ at the guardhouse, and I followed her through the labyrinth of corridors to her lab. She picked up a test kit consisting of a dozen beakers, and we walked down to the production line. She explained as she began in the pulp plant that she took samples at particular stages through the production line, up until the paper slicers custom sized and packaged the end products. Today, they were making twenty-pound, white photocopy paper.

We walked about a half-mile through the plant, collecting her chemical and paper samples. Back in her lab, she became the chemist, carefully testing the solutions and stock samples she'd taken as she walked the line. She carefully recorded each finding on a form on her desktop computer. The whole testing sequence took about an hour. I sat watching her work, occasionally asking a ‘What are you doing now?’ question. Allison answered every question for me.

When Allison was done, she stood and came over to the office chair I sat in. She checked the door to be sure no one was peeking in, leaned into the chair and put her hands on its arms, and then gave me a short kiss again. As she stood up she said, “There! That’s the most fun I’ve had in this whole plant in a year. For all the days that follow, I’ll remember I kissed you here.” She smiled and pulled me up. I went to kiss her again, however, she ducked under my arms and pulled me towards the door.

As we drove away from the paper mill, Allison told me, “I’m going to fix you the best dinner you’ve ever had.” We stopped by a grocery store on the way to her apartment. She was right, shopping with someone you like is a nice experience. I didn’t want to tell her, but I was having romantic thoughts about her – the first romantic thoughts I’d ever had about any woman. I knew I should temper my emotions; I’d gone from suicidal to having romantic thoughts about someone in half a day. I wondered how genuine my new feelings were, not to mention wondering how I could have made such a rapid change in how I felt.

When we were through shopping, we filled the trunk of her Honda with bags of groceries. She dropped me off at my house so I could get my car, and I followed Allison to her apartment. I helped her bring all the groceries into the apartment. My job during her dinner preparations was to sit at her kitchen counter and admire her, complimenting her on every trait and physical characteristic I could think of. I couldn’t imagine how I found to courage to say some of the things I did, but I did. Moreover, Allison loved it and kept giving me warm smiles and encouraging words.

Dinner consisted of seven courses. She started us with a small shrimp cocktail at her kitchen counter. We moved to her dining room table at this point, first for salads followed by cups of

lobster bisque soup, and then small sherbets that Allison claimed cleansed the palate in preparation for the main course. The entrée was a pork loin done to perfection, smothered in a rich sauce and served atop fresh al dente green beans. The dish was superb.

After dinner, she then brought me some cinnamon tea, a flavor I had confessed I liked during our all night talk. She followed that with some chocolate chip cookies and vanilla ice cream, a combination I'd also confessed a great weakness for but seldom got to enjoy.

I raved over her culinary skills, assuring her that she had ruined me for life, and that no other meal I ate would ever measure up to what she had produced.

We sat at the dinner table and enjoyed the last of the wine after I'd helped her clear away the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. I'd become pretty domesticated in my teenage years, and the habits hadn't worn off. Sitting across the table from her was one of the nicest moments in my life.

Allison told me, "This is the best night I've had since I moved here a year ago. I hope we 'date' again."

I said, "You should know I've never asked a girl out. In some ways this is my first date. Isn't that terrible? Here I am thirty-two, and I'm so inexperienced in this area of life. Do I just say, 'Hey, let's go out?'"

She laughed and said, "OK, when will you pick me up?"

She made me laugh at how I'd suddenly been trapped into asking her for a date. That was fine with me, so I said, "How about tomorrow at ten o'clock. We'll do a picnic up in the mountains. I know a really pretty place that has a stream and some waterfalls. We'll have to stop and buy stuff. The water will still be too cold to swim, but we can walk around there a little."

A short time later, I realized it was time for me to go home. I bid Allison goodnight. She held my hand at the door and squeezed her affection for me at the last instant before I left. At home, I barely slept. I thought of Allison a lot that night. I had hazy dreams about her, but I couldn't remember them in the morning. I felt the best I'd felt in months and couldn't wait for ten o'clock so I could pick her up. I cleaned my car and put a few things I thought might be handy for our picnic into the backseat. I was at her apartment at the dot of ten; she was waiting for me outside with a laundry basket filled with food and all the fixings for a meal, including a checkered tablecloth.

We put her things in the car and started our drive. I thanked her again for the great dinner she'd prepared the night before, as well as for the thoughtful preparation she'd given in

putting together some things for our picnic. The drive took over an hour through the rolling hills and up into the mountains near Ashville.

As we drove, we talked. I confessed to dreaming about her, and then worried I'd said too much. Allison laughed and told me she'd dreamed of me as well. We talked about dreaming, and that led to talking more about some of the things we'd shared during our night in the diner – more about my dreams of a college education, her having a loving family around her, our need for friends and companions. Somehow, we didn't seem to run out of topics to talk about.

I consulted a map at one point to be sure I'd end up on the correct road, and then thirty minutes later pulled into a secluded parking area that could only hold about four cars. For now, it looked as though we'd be alone.

We staked out a picnic table and then went on a short hike up to the beautiful waterfall that came cascading down the steep hillside. I'd come here years before the day after my mother died, and I'd been left alone in the world. Now I wanted to share the spot. We'd had rain the week before so the volume of water coming down the waterfall was impressive. We could barely hear ourselves talk over the roar of the water through the cascade.

We took a different route back to the picnic area, and then set up our luncheon with all the flourish of a five-star restaurant. We sat across from each other and dined al fresco. Allison somehow produced a chicken dish, as well as some fresh salmon as the main course. There were two kinds of salads, a baguette, a variety of cheeses, and, as a finish dear to my heart, the rest of the freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies.

I asked her, "How did all this suddenly appear in your basket? Did you prepare all this today?"

Allison blushed and said, "Well, I went to the grocery store early this morning and then did a little cooking. A few of the things are left-overs." She paused and looked at me, trying to decide whether to tell me something. She then went on, "I thought about you more last night, than I told you earlier: I like you – a lot." She gestured to the layout for our picnic and said,

"I guess I'm driven by the need to 'impress' you." She laughed and said, "Are you impressed?"

"Yes, I'm very impressed." I had my own awkward pause before I said, "And I like you a lot too. I'm glad this is the weekend and neither of us feel pressured to have to be at some job."

"What will you do for a job? You said you were between jobs."

I answered, “Well, you’ve inspired me. Maybe I’ll go back to being a mechanic. I could make a fortune in our town replacing air cleaners that mice have nested in.” We both laughed. We also both knew I’d ducked the question.

After a long silence, I felt that I had to step in. “Allison, I don’t know what I’m going to do. You don’t know how much of a turning point Friday night was in my life.” I put my head down and stared at the ground. “I didn’t expect to see Saturday morning, so this side of things is all new. I feel as though I entered a brand-new world – thanks to you.”

Allison came around the table and sat beside me. She put her head on my shoulder and held my hand in hers. We just sat in silence for a few moments. She finally said, “Joel, do you know what synchronicity is?”

I answered with a nod, “It’s when some things happen simultaneously and appear related, but they have no real connection. Right?”

Allison answered thoughtfully, “Right, but Friday night I felt synchronicity in meeting you.” She paused and went on, “Everyone at the party I’d been at had boyfriends or husbands. I was the odd man out. I had no one and I’d had no one for over a year. I was lonely and depressed. As I was driving home, I wished, very hard, for a boyfriend – for someone to love and someone who would love me.” She let a long silence fill the space between us and then completed her thought, “That was when my car stopped. I made a wish, and the universe brought me you. You were going to jump, but the universe brought you me – to stop you.” She had tears in her eyes as she talked and leaned against me.

I put my arm around her and said, “Somehow the bridge and what I’d planned to do seems far behind me. I know now what I was about to do was wrong. I’d just given up hope and saw no way out of my unhappiness. Now, I feel like you’ve shone a new light on everything. You’re so special to me.”

After a long silence, Allison said, “I think we feel the same about each other. The part of me that came out of a bad relationship is saying, no, no, no,’ and the lonely part is saying ‘go, go, go.’ I felt burned by what happened with Adam. You’re the first person I’ve let inside my shell since then. Joel, it’s going to take me some time to get used to being in a relationship again, but if you’re willing to hang around me I’d like to see where this goes.” She looked at me with eyes that pleaded for me to be with her.

I whispered, “This is my first relationship, and even though I’m older than you are I’m scared. I feel good, but nervous too. I too want to see where this can go. You’ve certainly given me a reason to live.”

“So we’ll take things a little slow. All right? We need to find out all the things about each other that we haven’t talked about; things that we don’t even know about ourselves, and

things that we keep in a dark closet. This has a lot to do with you, and a lot about what you're going to do with your life. It will take time to unfold. There's no rush here."

I looked up into her face, "What do you mean?"

"Joel, some things are broken inside you; things that worry me. You were about to end your life, and that's not normal. I've been depressed, but never suicidal. You're some kind of computer genius, but don't pursue it. You're better read than any ten people I know, and you crave a college education you think is out of reach. I need to understand more about what's deep inside you too, how you tick. Why you're the way you are."

"And you're willing to take the time to do that – with me?" I asked looking down at her. I felt privileged that someone so pretty and obviously talented would take a second look at me.

Now Allison looked down at the ground. She whispered, "Oh, yes. Most definitely."

As we drove home from our picnic, Allison made several suggestions to me about what she'd like to see me do to improve my life. I listened intently to what she said and resolved that I'd follow her suggestions. They were certainly better than the alternative I'd left myself with on Friday night – going back to bridge and jumping.

Allison also talked about maintaining a rational perspective on our relationship. Thus, at least for the coming week, she suggested we not see each other so we could both more clearly think about what we felt. She did, however, want a telephone call midweek to 'touch base.' She made me commit to call her.

RE-CREATION

Monday morning, at Allison's suggestion, I called the spouse of one of her co-workers – a psychiatrist. The woman psychiatrist had a specialty in pharmacology for treating depression. I made an appointment for Wednesday afternoon; however, she wanted me to get a blood and urine test at the local clinic before I saw her. This would help her diagnose my situation.

That same day, I drove to the county seat and filed the papers for changing my name. Every minute that went by, I became more and more 'Joel Odin Young.' I'd spent the entire weekend using my new name and liked it.

Tuesday, I went back to a couple of places I'd worked to see whether they had any job openings I might fill. By the end of the day, after some explaining about my name change, I had landed some part time work with one of the general contractors in town. I liked the idea of part time work: not only would it let me cover my bills, it would give me time over the rest of the spring to figure out what to do with my life, and also time to spend with Allison, if she would let me.

I was nervous before my Wednesday afternoon appointment with the psychiatrist. I felt as though I'd have to unscrew the top of my head and let the doctor wander around, examining every errant thought I'd ever had. Nonetheless, I sat alone in her office at the appointed time. There was no receptionist, just a handwritten sign that said, 'Please have a seat. I'll be with you shortly.'

Dr. Coral Moore appeared exactly at my appointment time. The older woman ushered me into her inner office. While there was a couch, she gestured for me to sit in a comfortable chair. I explained that my girlfriend worked with her husband and had urged me to come and see her after I'd contemplated suicide. I also explained that I didn't have any insurance that would pay for my time with her, so I'd have to arrange some kind of payment plan. The older woman brushed off my inability to pay with a wave of her hand, "I'll bill you, and you pay what you can when you can. Now let's get started. Tell me about yourself."

Coral, as she liked to be called, allowed me to unfold my story in my own way. Allison had told me you just went in and talked about yourself – what you did and how you felt about things. I didn't really have any secrets, but as I went along I talked about things I'd never realized were important to me. I also cried about a few things I hadn't realized I'd kept bottled up for so long. Coral barely spoke while I talked, usually only to urge me to continue or to clarify some point.

Near the end of my hour, Coral spoke, "Joel, I think you are experiencing what is called clinical depression. This is not uncommon; in fact, millions of others in the country have the same thing. Your symptoms seem classic: low mood – even feelings, as you had, about

suicide, poor self-esteem and self-confidence, mood swings, isolating yourself from the world, unwillingness to rise to your full potential – although you know it's there, and avoidance of relationships. Anyway, you should know I've seen many other people with the same symptoms and we've treated them all successfully. I'm personally amazed you have put up with these symptoms for so long.”

Coral waited for me to catch up with her assessment and then went on, “We're going to try some psychotropics and see what they do for you. Psychotropics are a class of drugs that affect your mental state. I expect we'll have to work over a couple of months to get the right mix and dosages to match your body chemistry. All your blood work and other tests from Monday don't appear to show any other malady causing your low emotions. I'm going to give you a prescription for your first couple of weeks of pills, but I want to see you again on a weekly basis for a while as we see how these work for you, plus I think you want to work through a few of the issues you touched on.” I nodded agreement.

She got up and left the room, coming back only a minute later with two prescriptions. She explained carefully, “The Klonopin will take effect immediately to reduce your anxiety about life and make you feel less stressed; take one every four to six hours. The Celexa or citalopram is for twenty milligram pills, and we'll start you on one a day. It'll take two or three weeks before these start to work, but the Klonopin will help you in the meantime. Once the Celexa kicks in I expect we'll have to adjust dosages up or down depending on how you feel.” She went on to give me detailed instructions for using each medicine, and asked me to keep a journal about how I felt. Coral also urged me to go on the Internet and read about both medicines, including their side effects. I assured her I would do so when I got home. We made an appointment for the following week, and I left.

Driving back home on the county roads between towns, I felt as though someone had given me a new lease on life; and that my new life would be helped by the two prescriptions. I pondered why I'd never sought help before and just struggled with my depressions over the past two decades. There appeared no definitive answer, except my own machismo making me tough out my life without outside help. I thought that when Allison stopped me from jumping off the McCormick Bridge I'd ended one phase of my life abruptly, and rather than dying in that instant, I'd chosen to start my life anew.

As we agreed on Sunday night, I took the initiative Wednesday night and called Allison. I'd written out a list of the things I had to tell her, but even with that preparation I felt the first few minutes of our conversation were stilted. I'd never called a girl just to talk.

Allison was forgiving, and I think she realized how awkward making this call was for me. She relaxed me, telling me about the latest rumors at the paper mill and several funny stories she heard from her co-workers. I'd taken my medicines, but still felt the anxiety in building our budding relationship. We made a date to go to the movies on Friday night, and Allison asked me to plan something athletic – like a hike – we could do on Saturday or Sunday – or

both days. Just before we hung up, she told me she liked spending time with me and hoped we could share a good part of the weekend together. I think my insides turned to mush, and I got warm inside. I told her I was glad she felt that way because I did too.

Over the following months, from outward appearances, we were a young man and woman simply dating. Internally, I was in turmoil over how to date and what to do. I went to the library and took out half a dozen books on dating and being single. I read them all in one night, but felt if I followed their prescriptions in the step-by-step manner they outlined, I'd be too artificial. The result was that we went a wide variety of dates: picnics, movies, skating, a talk about area history, a long walk in the rain with no umbrella, an afternoon at my favorite bookstore, canoeing, a bicycle ride, a water balloon fight, swimming, day-trip to the ocean, and on and on. We both had fun and got increasingly comfortable with each other.

As we dated, I realized it wasn't so important what we did, only that we were together. Further, when we were together we talked. I learned more about Allison, and she learned ten times as much about me. She could be intense about things she was interested in, and, as she told me one day, she was deeply interested in me; thus, I became the object of her focus and of her interviewing skills.

I continued to see Dr. Coral Moore each week, and between Allison's 'interviews' and talking about my life with Coral, I found corners in my mind I didn't know existed. The medicines gradually kicked in and as dosage levels were optimized, I did feel better and much less withdrawn. The anxiety about dating went away over time too. I found myself being more conversational with the people I worked with or that I met in stores. One day, I had been talking to one of the clerks in the building supply store where I shopped for my job; the young lady told me it was a pleasure to have such friendly people like me come into the store every day. I'd passed a hurdle and become 'friendly.'

Allison's stricture on not seeing each other during the week disappeared after that first week. Outside of work, we started to be together almost every waking moment, only heading back to our abodes to sleep.

One warm spring evening while we sat on the porch of my house Allison got me talking about how I'd ended up being so withdrawn. She said, "Part of it is chemistry, I know. That's why your new drugs are helping. But, there must be some other things, for instance, how your parents treated you or other things."

I found it easy to describe my past to Allison since Coral had just walked me through that part of my life in detail a few days earlier. I started, "I guess to understand me, you need to understand my parents, and in turn their parents. My grandparents on all sides were raised in strict patriarchal homes with a strong sense of what was right and wrong. They grew up with rules, rules, rules. Broken rules or bad behaviors were punished with a belt or switch; the number of lashes depending on the severity of the misdeed. There was no mercy. I

remember my father still had scars from some of the beatings he'd been given as a child and teenager."

I went on, "In all those homes, at least as far as I could ever tell, there was no love. There was duty, there was responsibility, there were commitment, and fidelity, and a sense of belonging to the community, but no love. The beatings were given in the name of discipline – their equivalent of love, but today I see that as control. They wanted to control their children – to dominate them."

"Go on," Allison said with a serious look on her face.

"My father replicated that model with me, only he was a little more moderate in his beatings; by that, I mean he didn't scar me for life the way his father did to him – at least physically. Instead, he'd berate me, and so I struggled through childhood without a whole lot of self-esteem or self-confidence. Nonetheless, until I was fourteen and he was too weak to do it, he beat me at least once a week – for my own good if there was no better reason."

"My mother would watch approvingly when I was pelted with his belt. As a kid, she'd sometimes deliver my punishments – usually spankings, at least until I got big enough to squirm away from her. I'd run and hide. Hiding became my way of avoiding the pain and the loss of love. Sometimes I hid from a lashing, but other times I hid to avoid being screamed at – being told how inadequate I was."

"That's terrible," Allison told me. She asked, "Didn't she ever hold you? Comfort you?"

"Only when I was small, and I really hurt myself playing, but it always came with 'Big boys don't cry!' statement or some kind. She had no good role model, nor did my father. Overtime, I learned that if I stayed in my room and didn't go out that I'd avoid the beatings and verbal abuse. So I gave up having friends, because I always got in trouble with them. I found that reading was an acceptable activity, so I became a voracious reader. At least, my parents approved of that."

Allison asked, "Did your parents read a lot?"

"No," I responded. "Isn't it funny, they built up that large library in the house, but they'd read only a few of the books. Later, I learned they'd bought many of the books for me – so that I would read them. Most of them were used books from yard sales or second hand shops. So I read and read and read."

She asked, "Why didn't you ever get interested in girls? That would have been natural, particularly in your later teenage years when your hormones kicked in."

I told her, “Two reasons: first, by the time I should have started dating I was home most of the time taking care of one or both of my parents as they died from lung cancer or I was working; and second, from the time I was twelve – maybe earlier, I had the fear of God put in me about seeing a girl and doing something inappropriate with her. For years, I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew it was bad – really bad, and that I could even go to jail for doing the wrong things – even thinking the wrong things. Well, if you don’t know what’s bad and what those boundaries are, and you don’t want a beating, you don’t do anything, and with my parents, you hid away.”

“What about school? You went to school. Didn’t you talk with your other classmates?”

“My parents told me not to talk to or listen to other kids – that they’d give me a lot of false information, tell me lies, and try to get me in trouble. All that stuff turned me into a loner. I’d go to school and then either come home and take care of my father or mother, or I’d go to work.”

“Oh, yes,” Allison said. “You said you worked to support the family. What was that about?”

“Well, my father started to get sick when I was twelve years old. He still smoked like a chimney, but he’d hack away coughing up black phlegm and then light up another cigarette. He got progressively weaker and had to cut back on his work schedule at the pulp mill. He told me I had to pick up the slack by working and bringing money home to make up for his loss of income. He told me it was my responsibility to keep the family solvent – at twelve! Fortunately, my mother still worked and that kept things in good shape for a few more years.”

Allison shook her head in disbelief.

“So, I went to work after school, every available moment sometimes. That was when I started working as a mechanic and gas station attendant. I made minimum wage, and I’d bring home every penny of it for food or to help pay the house expenses; at least the house didn’t have a mortgage on it. When he was on his last legs, my father told me I had to keep the house and make sure I did the upkeep on it. At least I understood that it was cheap living if all you had to pay were the utilities and the taxes.”

“Your father got sick when you were twelve, but when did he die?”

“He lasted three years after that, extended slightly by chemo and radiation treatments. The health insurance lasted for a while, but my mother wasn’t so lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“She had the same diagnosis as my father when I was fourteen years old – lung cancer. She’d smoked too, but she managed to stop after the doctors told her she had to. She also lasted three years, but her treatments were less regular and less effective since by that time she wasn’t covered under my father’s health insurance. All she had was Medicaid. She kept working until I turned sixteen, but then she had to stop too. We coasted for a year on my part-time work and what my father and mother had squirreled away in the bank. I started working two part-time jobs then, one in the afternoon after school and the other at night cleaning offices for a couple of law firms in the same building downtown, at least until she required nearly constant care.”

“Where were you in school when she died?”

“I’d just started as a senior. She died at home right before Christmas. I’d had to quit working over the previous summer so I could be a nurse to her. I missed a lot of school in the fall, but people just sort of ignored it since I kept up with the assignments. I’d read or do homework while she’d be asleep from her drugs. They put her on a lot of morphine near the end so she wouldn’t be in pain. After she died, I should have gone into a foster home because I was under eighteen. I just didn’t bother to tell anyone about her death. They could have found out in the town newspaper, but nobody apparently did. She’d made me promise on her deathbed that I would graduate high school. She never did – nor my father. I finished in early June; by then I was eighteen. I got a full-time job right away and started to figure out how to live according to all the rules they’d laid down for me over the past six years.”

“And by then your personality was set?”

“I guess. I remember the first couple of years; I was scared being alone – living alone. Most of the time, things went well if I followed the ‘rules.’ That was when I really got hooked on computers. They were really another avenue for me to find things to read; for me to learn about things. I had a full-time job at the mill and started doing janitorial work for some of the offices downtown. Neither job required me to interact with people very much. Couple those jobs with reading at home, and I got used to being alone.”

Allison thought for a moment and then summed things up: “So you were warned off girls and told to work your ass off and keep the house. You never had the opportunity to develop any friends in school, and then took jobs where you didn’t have to interact with people.” She thought for a minute and then asked, “Didn’t you ever think of changing ... of breaking out of the mold that your parents set for you?”

“Not for years. It was easier to become a recluse. I didn’t want the kind of rejection my parents had given me. Again, there was no love in our family, only duty, obligation, service to parents, and work to keep things above water. I got used to things, but the more I read, the more I realized I was on the fringe and there was so much more to life. I wanted more, but didn’t know how to go about it. No one was around to encourage me or push me. I was

scared to try, and then more recently scared of staying the way I'd been. I saw only the one way out, and that's when you found me."

"Do you think you can change now?" She asked.

I shook my head and whispered, "Oh, God, I hope so. I hope so." Allison came and sat beside me; she hugged me tightly.

One weekend in early May, almost three months after we'd met, Allison helped me apply to take the Scholastic Achievement Tests or SATs. She figured I'd read so much and had a technical bent that I might do pretty well on the exams without too much preparation. She bought me some study guides that I used for a few weeks ahead of the exam.

The weekend after the SATs, she helped me apply to the University of North Carolina for advanced placement in their undergraduate program. I also applied for financial aid and a scholarship. The hardest part was writing a three-page letter about why, at this stage in my life, I wanted to attend. I didn't have my SAT scores yet, but she thought given my age and special situation that they'd pay less attention to them.

A month later, I got a letter from the University asking me to schedule a visit to the main campus, emphasizing that I needed to be interviewed by someone in the Admissions Office. A couple of weeks after that Allison accompanied me on a hot Friday morning on a drive across the state to Chapel Hill. I had my interview, and then we walked around campus holding hands. I worried about my acceptance, but Allison was sure I'd get in.

A week later, I got a large package in the mail. I'd been accepted at the University. I would have to jump a number of hurdles to get credit for some of my 'life experience,' but I was happy to do that.

Allison was standing beside me in my front yard when I opened the package from the University. She was beaming. She knew just from seeing the 'UNC package,' whereas I hadn't been too sure about what it contained. I read her the short acceptance letter with tears rolling down my cheeks. This was another step in my dream of a better life; one I never thought I'd do – one I had thought at one time I'd never live to see. We hugged, and I sobbed on her shoulders. I'd held the tension for weeks about what my future life would be like, and now, suddenly, I knew I'd be a student for two years and then a whole new world of possibilities would open up for me. I could change, and my acceptance was proving to me that I could make every change I needed to make.

A week after the University accepted me; I got a letter from the Secretary of State of North Carolina notifying me that henceforth, I was 'Joel Odin Young.' The young man whose initials were S.A.D. ceased to exist, and the 'new me' now had the responsibility to become the person I'd dreamed of.

The following weekend, Allison told me she wanted to fix me another one of her gourmet dinners to celebrate all my successes: my name change, my acceptance at UNC, getting my depression under control, and starting to make the major changes I craved in my life.

We started about noon on that Saturday, collecting groceries for her culinary masterpiece. I was tasked with picking a fancy cheese, two kinds of wine, and a liqueur to go with our meal. When I got back to her apartment, the whole apartment and her courtyard smelled like ambrosia due to her cooking.

I walked in with my groceries, and Allison ordered me to sit and keep her company. She told me she wanted to talk with me while she worked on our dinner. “Pour me some red wine,” She mandated in a nice way. I complied.

Allison studied me for a minute as she chopped up some basil for one of her dishes. Finally, she asked, “Joel, tell me what you think your life will be like after graduation.”

Her question rocked me. I’d been thinking with a pretty close time horizon, specifically, getting to college and through to graduation. I walked around her living room thinking of her question, ending in front of the door to her patio. I sipped my wine and thought.

I turned back to her, “Well, a lot can happen in the two or three years it’ll take me to finish at UNC, but here’s one model for you: I think I want to study computer science. I’ll have to work my tail off to do that, but it’ll really set me up for some great jobs when I graduate. I’ll be able to go about anywhere and the pay should be very good.”

Allison nodded for me to continue.

I got serious all of a sudden: “I hope by then I’ll have re-socialized myself back into the land of the living. I may never be a social butterfly, but I will have moved from where I am now in that direction. I’ll have friends.”

I moved back towards Allison, actually coming into the kitchen as I talked. I said, “I’ll have a few very close friends ... and I hope you’re one of them. In fact, if there are no others, I hope you and I are ... well, as close as we can get ... as close as you’ll allow.”

Allison set her knife down with great intention and washed her hands at the sink. She dried them on a nearby dishtowel and then turned to me. She said, “Joel Odin Young, I’ll be as close as you want.” She came and pressed her body against me, something she’d only hinted at in recent weeks, and then kissed me with a passion I’d never felt from her before.

Our relationship had not been without physical contact. We’d increasingly started to kiss and hug a lot more, than in the first couple of months when we started dating. The upward slope

of our relationship was slow and measured, as Allison had said it would be. Since I didn't know the landscape at all, I always deferred to her. I felt if I were to take the lead that I'd overstep some unknown boundary and jeopardize our relationship. One time, I told her that, and she'd told me not to worry and that she had an idea where things were going.

The kiss left me panting and gasping for breath. She told me to get back on the other side of the counter in the living room; otherwise, she'd never finish dinner. I dutifully took up my assigned station.

Allison turned to me as she returned to her meal preparation and asked, "What are you going to do differently to make all those things happen ... to get rid of your baggage?"

I knew what she meant. We'd talked about this when I'd shared with her my talks with Dr. Coral Moore, my psychiatrist. The issue was all my baggage, and how to leave it behind. I liked that psychological term – 'baggage' – for all the psychological handicaps I carried from my past into the present. It seemed so descriptive. What I needed to do was lose my baggage.

I answered thoughtfully, "Coral gave me a whole lot of things to use. I'll be writing imaginary letters, doing role-play with imaginary characters in my mind – redefining the past in some ways. I'll be forcibly redefining what acceptable behavior means – particularly in terms of being social; I need to interact more with people in nice social situations. I have to stop being a victim and making excuses; and now I have a whole new vocabulary that helps me catch myself when I start to slide into my old way of thinking or rationalizing what I know is behavior I don't really want. Lastly, Coral told me to get a mentor – someone that will be an external set of eyes to what I am trying to do." I paused and looked over at Allison; our eyes met. "I was sort of hoping you'd be that someone. It's a lot of effort, and not something I ask lightly."

I watched a tear run down her cheek. Allison had choked up, but she strongly nodded to show that she accepted her new role. Of course, it was a role she'd already been playing since we met. She wiped her cheek on her shoulder and went on with dinner. I was surprised when there were no more questions from her. I could tell she'd gotten really pensive.

Dinner was exactly as she promised it would be; course after course of nectar that only a gourmet chef could deliver. The core of the meal consisted of Rock Cornish game hens stuffed with kale, walnuts, and cranberries. Allison had also put together a superb Caesar salad, a selection of tapas including miniature scallops wrapped in bacon, vegetables, her trademark sorbet between courses, and Boston cream pie for dessert. I was in heaven. I praised her with every superlative adjective I could think of.

When we were finished, Allison pulled me over to her couch. She dimmed the lights in the room, and was not subtle in her approach to me, and for that I was glad; I wouldn't have been sure how to take the initiative in such a situation. She slid into an intimate position in front of me and kissed me passionately. The kisses went on for quite a while. Allison then taught me about French kissing, and how to use my tongue on her neck and face, both to give pleasure as well as to take pleasure. She kept talking to me in a low sexy voice about what she liked and asking whether I liked it when she did this or that to me, such as kissing me, or using her tongue in my ear. This was a part of my education I'd been lacking.

Allison advanced our romancing by taking my right hand and placing it on one of her breasts. I'd never felt a woman's breast before, even through a blouse. She talked to me in a low throaty voice – almost a whisper, and taught me what to do, how to stroke and use my fingers, teasing her by using my fingers to probe gently inside the material and stroke the skin on her stomach or chest, or how to pinch her nipple gently through all the layers of material. I assumed that I should be more assertive, and so I unbuttoned her blouse, each button taking an inordinate amount of fumbling and time on my part, not so much because I was inept, but because I remembered in a book I'd read that I should take my time and extend this foreplay to the maximum extent possible if I wanted to please my partner.

When I had her blouse fully unbuttoned, I ran my fingers around her lacy brassiere. There wasn't much to it, yet there seemed to be a lot of Allison inside the bra. She filled out the material to its fullest extent. She whispered to me, "It unhooks in the front." I realized she wanted me to touch her.

I ran my fingers down to the clasp, sneaking a peak in the dim light at how the coupling mechanism worked. My mind shook off whatever willpower I thought I was applying to the situation. I heard Allison panting, waiting for me to assault her naked breasts, and I was eager to please her. I undid the clasp, and helped her shed her blouse and the bra, tossing them aside as they came off her body in my hands.

I cupped my hands over each of her breasts, feeling the nipple of each breast harden in my grasp. As she hardened, I could feel my own hardness in my slacks. I could feel her heart beating beneath my hands; Allison pushed into my hands by arching her back. She rolled her whole body towards me so I had better access to her and could kiss her better. I tested the weight and feel of each breast, relishing in the sex appeal of Allison's body and the strong attraction I felt for her.

I leaned in and kissed each breast, and Allison again pushed herself into my mouth. I hummed around each nipple, running my tongue around her areola. I delivered sensation to her and received the oral feelings on my own tongue. My meager knowledge of sexual situations drew mostly from two books: *Lady Chatterly's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, and *The Joy of Sex* by Alex Comfort. I'd read the first book several times, memorizing the many sexual scenes and wishing I were party to them. The second book I'd read standing in the

aisle at a bookstore in Charlotte. Now my wildest dreams were coming true; I was the leading character in my own love scene. ‘Be creative’ and ‘Use your imagination’ were the two primary instructions I recalled from the books.

I was nervous. I worried that I’d go too fast, and Allison would reject me. The fears about sex and intimacy implanted in my head by my parents rushed through my head, even though I’d talked them through with my psychiatrist. My hands shook, and my palms were sweaty. My mouth was dry, although I continued to use my tongue to please Allison.

I loved every inch of Allison’s exposed skin, using my fingers, my hand, my tongue, my hair, and my arms to stroke and smooth her, to arouse her, to excite her, and to please her. The more we came in contact with each other the faster I wanted to move, to stimulate her to a sexual climax, something I knew would bring her great pleasure and be memorable for her about this night. I’d never been this close to a woman, so remained uncertain that what I did would have the desired effect. I felt my own sexual excitement, and I expected to take care of myself when I was alone.

I wasn’t sure whether Allison peaked or not. She moaned and kissed me with such ardor, plus her body writhed into my every touch as I stroked and smoothed her.

Suddenly, she pulled away from me and looked me in the eye with a studied look. She said, “Joel, I want you to make love to me, but not here, in my bed.” She stood, her breasts erect and proud as she pulled me to a standing position. I felt embarrassed due to my obvious erection, however, I needn’t have been. Allison proceeded to strip even scrap of clothing from my body as we stood in the dim light of her living room. I could no more have hidden my excitement than I could have hidden the moon.

When she finished revealing my pale body, she removed the last of her own clothing – the snug Bermuda shorts she’d worn most of the day. Beneath them she wore a small thong, a frill she quickly disposed of.

We stood marveling at each other’s bodies, her nudity inflaming me more than any passage in any book I’d ever read, or any illustration I could ever remember. Every curve, every nuance of shadow across her body, aroused me. I felt thrilled and honored she shared her treasure with me, and knighted by the potential she offered in that instant. She came into my arms and pressed her nakedness against mine. Her hand found my excitement, and she stroked me to a hardness I didn’t know possible as she kissed me with a new passion.

Allison pulled me into her bedroom, a frilly feminine room with a dresser top of perfumes and fragrances, and sundry makeup products. She lit two candles on the dresser, the only other light coming through the door from the dimly lit living and dining room. She looked at me to see whether I was happy with the effect. I was pleased beyond belief that she wanted

light in the room. I wanted to see her body, to enjoy forever its perfections, and to be able to enjoy the visual stimuli we'd create for each other.

My uncertainty came back when she lay back on her bed and motioned me to join her. As I slid in beside her, I softly said, "I've never been with a woman. I'm not sure ..." Allison's fingers touched my lips to stop my talking. I looked at her with all the new emotions I felt pouring from my soul.

She said to me in a soft and caring voice, "Don't worry, Joel. I'll show you. I'll teach you what I know, and then we'll make up our own things to do from there."

Time ceased to exist. The world I'd lived in all my life vanished. All that existed was the unity of two souls – the complete union of mind, body and spirit between Allison and me. I gave myself completely to her, and knew, deep inside, that she held nothing back. The pleasures were beyond description. My heart soared. I followed her lead as she led me to places, emotions, and feelings I couldn't believe existed, and then she allowed my cresting energy to take her to new intensities and feelings that she hadn't experienced before.

The intimacy far exceeded anything I could express. The words in the books I'd read seemed so inadequate to describe this experience. My focus had shifted from my own nervousness and lack of confidence, to the care and delivery of pleasure to my partner. I felt my self-esteem growing with each sound and move she made to express her pleasure in what I was doing to her.

Eventually, I collapsed into Allison's arms, and she held me, cradling my head in the nape of her neck and stroking my back. We remained coupled from the lovemaking we had just consummated; she insisted I stay there as long as I could, that it was part of how I'd know she cared about me. We hugged so tightly I thought our bodies would fuse into one another.

Allison finally whispered, "Oh, Joel that was wonderful. I hope you know how happy I am now." She paused as though she wanted to say more only some words seemed to catch in her throat.

I wanted to say more and did, "Allison," I whispered, "I don't know what the beginning of love feels like, but I feel as though this is the beginning of something I really like – really love." I lied; I'd been in love with her since the night we met, and moreover, I felt she knew it.

She gasped, "Oh, Joel I feel the same way." Instantaneously, her legs pulled me more tightly to her body and our mouths found each other in another passionate kiss. She pulled away from me and looked me in the eye, and said aloud in a throaty voice, "I'll take the risk. I'll say it first, although it's scary for each of us – Joel, I love you."

TRANSFORMATION

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is one of the prettiest college towns in the world. Tree-lined pathways and roadways wend through the large campus, revealing dozens of picturesque buildings aimed at higher learning. A classic bell tower tolled off the time, and the campus even had a wishing well that I passed every time I was on campus.

After I'd been accepted at the University, Allison had helped me put the house on the real estate market and sell it. A new foreman at the food processing plant bought the house; he was getting married in October and wanted a first home.

In early August, just before the closing on the house, we packed my possessions and books, put them in a U-Haul trailer, and moved them to Chapel Hill. But, the best news was that Allison's possessions and furniture were in the trailer too. We'd become an 'item.' We were inseparable. I'd fallen head over heels in love with her, and the feeling, she assured me, was mutual. She quit her job at the paper mill so she could come to Chapel Hill to be with me while I pursued my dream of getting a college degree.

We rented a small house in Carrboro, just west of the Chapel Hill campus, and in one day we'd moved in, turned in the trailer, and unpacked. The house had two bedrooms, one of which we turned into a study room for me and a project room for Allison. I liked sharing with her. We got a large bed for the master bedroom, and we used Allison's furniture for our living room and dining room since it was so much better than the things I had continued to live with in my parent's old house; those things were left behind, in another life.

Officially, I was a junior, however, I had a wide range of mandatory courses I had to complete, such as Freshman English, so my first semester turned out to be a hodge-podge of courses. Allison had intervened with the University on my behalf to help me get advanced placement. To get some of my 'life experience' credits, I had to write a number of papers summarizing parts of my life or work; the papers had to be acceptable to the school for me to get that credit.

Fortunately, for Allison, there were a number of biotech firms in the geographic area. Barely a week after she started her job search, she had a great job as a research chemist with Pharm-Gen, a pharmaceuticals company based in Research Triangle Park. As part of her employment package, the company would also pay for her to attend the University to get her Master's Degree in Biochemistry. Thus, Allison signed up to start an evening Master's degree program at UNC, taking one course a semester to start with.

The two tasks I thought would be the hardest turned out to be relatively easy: declaring a major at the University, and getting a part-time job. I picked Computer Science as a major, because I liked working with computers and knew there'd always be a job dealing with them. The technical work also built on much of the handiwork and reading I'd done over the past

decade, plus it didn't require me to interact heavily with the general public. Armed with that decision, I went job-hunting in Research Triangle Park, near where Allison would work. Health-Tronics hired me on the spot after listening to my well-rehearsed story about my life and wanting to get ahead at the ripe old age of thirty-two. Even better, they decided to pay me eighteen dollars an hour, far more than any of the on-campus jobs posted at the University Placement Office, and the most I'd ever been paid on an hourly basis.

Friday evening after the first full week of my classes and her working, Allison and I sat on the back porch of our home with a bottle of cheap champagne – it tasted wonderful. We were both so happy I couldn't imagine there was any better life than this one. My head was spinning from my first week of classes and my rapid induction into the University scene, but I acknowledged at least some level of comfort in most of my courses.

After we'd toasted to our success on our new activities and then to each other, I told her, "You were so right to get me to come here – and to make all the other changes in my life. I can't believe I had all these false stories about how I could never do what I've done these past few months. Ally, you saved me."

I kneeled in front of Allison and kissed her. "I love you so much my heart feels it won't fit in my body if it grows anymore." She laughed and kissed me back. As we were prone to do on the least provocation, we went inside and made love. We were still in that magical stage where we could barely keep our hands off of each other, and where sex was the solution to nearly anything. We solved a lot of problems that way. Later, dressed in campus grunge, we roamed downtown by the University for some pizza and beer.

We fell into a routine built around my schooling and Allison's work. We'd leave the house at seven-thirty, her heading for work, and my heading to a morning full of classes. I'd eat lunch in my car as I drove to my part-time job at Health-Tronics each afternoon. We'd have an early dinner, sometimes going out and then in the evenings, I'd study. Allison would read or, one evening a week, take a course in her new program at the University.

Allison insisted that I make friends with some of the other students and some of the people at my work. This was part of what she called my 'socialization campaign.' The idea was that I would become more comfortable working and interacting with other people in both work and social situations than I had in my hermit life – the term we'd started to call the past fifteen years of my life. That seemed ideal, except I needed time to study, work, and take classes; there wasn't a whole lot of other time. Nonetheless, I did befriend another computer science student in one of my classes: he was older than most of the other students, as I was. I also warmed to several people at work, going out of my way to be sociable with them. I even found a new friend in my English professor, a white-haired older man that reminded me of Merlin in a tweed jacket – Dr. Stone Goodman.

Allison also met some people at work that she told me she liked. Shortly after classes really got underway, she suggested we host a cookout with some of our new friends. So one autumn Saturday afternoon, I built a fire in the barbeque pit that belonged to the house, and many of our new friends came and joined us for a cookout.

We assembled an interesting mix of people: their ages ran from twenty to sixty; there seemed a balance of men and women, married and single; and their professions ranged all over the map – students, grad students, one English professor, a number of biochemists, a number of electronic technicians, some engineers, a finance person or two, several bankers, a couple of housewives, plus Allison and me.

I'd never hosted a party in my life. I was nervous, but Allison assured me that everyone would have a good time. She told me all I had to do was to make sure people had drinks in their hands, and that she'd take care of the rest. I knew I was also supposed to greet people and be conversational, so I resolved that part of the 'new me' would be congenial.

Allison went out of her way to introduce me to her new 'best' friend at work, Kate. Kate was about my age and stunning; she was also a biochemist. She had long brunette hair that came to her waist, pretty brown eyes she occasionally hid behind lightly tinted aviator eyeglasses, and a robust figure that turned eyes.

While I had never failed to notice a pretty girl, Kate stirred something deeper in me. For the first time since I'd met Allison, I felt conflicted. I pushed the feelings aside and returned to being the cordial host, yet frequently during the party I'd catch myself staring at Kate. Several times, I got caught and she would give me an extra-special smile to tell me she was interested too.

I could tell there was a special rapport between Kate and Allison, plus Kate had an amazing ability to blend in and get the eclectic group of people in the yard to socialize together. No one felt left out, and there were always laughter and energetic conversation wherever she stood. She didn't allow anyone to become a wallflower, pulling them into one of the social circles and providing the bridge lines to get them involved in the conversation.

Beside her social graces, Allison told me that Kate was a gifted biochemist. She already had two patents to her name and was considered one of the rising stars at the company they worked at. She could be serious, or social, or both, apparently. Allison also told me that since Kate had graduated from Ohio State with her master's degree, she'd had a series of love relationships that didn't work out for her, and was now 'in-between' guys. She said that Kate had high standards and looked for values and traits that she knew would yield a lasting relationship.

Our afternoon and cookout dinner our guests drifted away in the early evening until the only remaining guests were Kate and Dr. Goodman, my English professor – who kept telling

everyone to call him Stone, his first name. Both pitched in to help us with clean up and to get some of our furniture back into the house. After straightening the four of us reconvened on the small deck of the house, more relaxed now that the other guests had left. I brought out some more wine for us, and we proceeded to continue our conversations about life as the night turned cool.

I sat in a lawn chair, and Kate stood behind me and massaged my shoulders while she talked with Allison and me. I glanced at Allison; however, she didn't seem to be upset about Kate's touching me. I liked Kate, and to have her kneading my tired shoulder muscles was a treat; when I looked up, she just smiled, and told me to enjoy her efforts. Kate baited Stone Goodman with a leading question, "So, Professor, are you teaching all your wisdom to the class Joel is taking with you?"

Stone laughed heartily, "Young lady, I am not sure I have attained the status of having wisdom yet. I remain on that elusive search. In fact, I continue to accumulate experiences that prove I have little of that rare commodity."

She probed deeper, "So what are you teaching them ... nouns, verbs, adjectives?"

"Oh no," he said with a chuckle. "I have three major themes I hope they understand by the end of the term; perhaps you've already learned about them." He shot her a teasing glance and went on, "The first is to act in unorthodox ways. I think the world is changing quickly, and old ways of doing things will no longer work as well as new creative and transformational ways of thinking and doing things."

Allison, Kate, and I nodded, so he went on, "The second is to see beauty in the present moment – the 'now,' despite what it holds for you. The only thing 'bad' about anything is the label you put on it. The only evils are the malevolent thoughts you hold in your own mind. If you reject these negatives and don't buy into them, you have beauty in the 'now' despite what is happening. Change your thinking; change your life. The only sin is really the un-lived life – the life you won't allow in the 'now' because of what you carry from the past or what you worry about in the future."

Lastly, Stone told us, "The third theme for the semester is that we each have many contrasts: for instance, a dark side and a light side, a good side and a bad side, a spiritual side and an evil side. We are full of polar opposites that make us who we are. To reject the parts of our being that we don't like is not only impossible; it is folly. What we need to do is understand our juxtapositions, and how to use them wisely."

He paused and added, "Those three are just for this term and this class, yet there are so many other lessons of life to teach – all through the graces of great literature, of course. Teaching gives me the ability to share what little I have learned about myself and about life."

I found great profundity in his statements. Allison and Kate both asked questions and were more animated in their discussion with him. I listened attentively, but really thought more deeply about the lessons he'd just shared with us. I felt he'd been talking especially to me, perhaps knowing I was searching for wisdom and these lessons more than any of the others.

A little later, Stone bid us all goodnight and left. Kate left a little later, after helping us with the last of the dirty dishes. As she left, she kissed my cheek affectionately, and for a moment, pressed her body against mine. I was surprised, first that she found me attractive enough to say goodbye that way, and second, that I was worthy. My old insecurities rapidly resurfaced, making me look at Kate to be sure she wasn't toying with me. She wasn't.

Allison and I made love that night. Allison made the event memorable by invoking Kate's name in the midst of our lovemaking. "Didn't you love Kate? Weren't you attracted to her? Didn't she turn you on? Wouldn't you like to kiss her? Wouldn't you like to make love to her?" Her erotic taunts went on and on and became more explicit. While erotic and seductive, I wondered what purpose they had. If their purpose were to excite me to some new height, she succeeded. Moreover, Allison seemed to get excited by her statements about Kate as well. Later, we lay panting together, very content in our love for one another.

The weeks went by, and I was pleased with my progress at the University. I completed two of the four life experience papers I had to write and got outstanding grades on them. My midterm exam grades were consistently A's and B's, grades that gave a real boost to my self-esteem and self-confidence; I was succeeding at the University. Moreover, as time went by, I cemented my friendships with the people I'd met and liked at the start of the semester. For the first time in my life, I felt 'normal.'

As my life centered on my studies, I felt increasingly guilty about ignoring Allison in favor of the books and papers I had to digest and be tested on. Thus, I felt some relief when Allison and Kate started to spend more and more time together. As the days went by, Kate progressively became a fixture at the house. The harmonious resonance between the two women extended to include me. I liked Kate a lot and felt comfortable around her. She was the second woman in my life that I could easily talk to, and often we fell into deep conversations about some subject – work, ethics, religion, spirituality, politics, genealogy, relationships, or urban issues, to mention only a few. She was intelligent, reasoned, and loved to engage in the debates we held whenever I could take some time from my studies.

In some ways, Kate was a rebel. She often prided herself on heretical views about most of the topics we discussed, views that were outliers compared to most of society. She talked about her 'goody-goody' older brother, telling me about how he had everything he wanted – job, husband, children, house – but was unhappy. "He's too conservative," Kate exclaimed; "What he needs is a dose of excitement."

Kate described growing up in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, amid boring parents and her brother in small town America. She seemed interested in breaking out of her mold, and had tried living in Manhattan for a year before college; she decided the big city was also not for her, but liked much of the city's ethic and ethos. She talked openly about past boyfriends, losing her virginity at fifteen, rebelling against her parents, and her desire for some kind of non-conformist marriage when the time came and she met the right man.

Kate liked to touch Allison or me, particularly when we were sitting around talking. At first, I found it unusual to have her giving Allison or me a neck rub, but then I started to take it for granted. I found myself looking for opportunities to return the favor by massaging Kate's neck or back. I always looked to be sure Allison appeared comfortable with whatever we were doing. Touching Kate or allowing her to touch me stimulated and aroused me. I sometimes felt awkward about these feelings; however, I didn't want them to stop. I liked being able to touch two women in an intimate way.

Allison asked once if it were all right for her to tell Kate 'everything' about me, and I told her I had no secrets. I had never said much about my hermit life, parents, or suicide attempt to Kate, however, I'm sure Allison told her soon after her question came up. Eventually, I assumed that Kate knew almost as much information about me as Allison did. The converse was true too: the more Kate came around, the more I learned about her and liked her.

I still thought it peculiar that from time to time Allison would bring up Kate's name in the midst of our lovemaking, either as an alternate to her or in a way that hinted at a more complex relationship. By then, I'd learned to roll with Allison's fantasies and accept them for the erotica they appeared to be. My male libido having been discovered, I always enjoyed Allison's dirty pillow talk and often contributed my own remarks. We constantly found new ways to please each other.

When Kate became a daily visitor at the house, she helped out in many ways and coached Allison on the advanced chemistry course she was taking, using her mentoring as an excuse to hone her own skills several years after she'd gotten her advanced degree in the subject at Ohio State.

Kate started to kiss me more regularly a few weeks after we met. At first, they were small kisses, the kind you get when you say hello to someone or get thanked for something by a friend. But, a couple of weeks later the kisses became more significant, more romantic, and more suggestive. Allison was often in the room, and I know I blushed repeatedly over the contact. Several times each week, Kate would find an excuse to give me a full-body press hug and kiss that almost knocked my socks off. I'd often find myself breathing hard afterwards, especially when she turned to repeat the gesture on Allison. Kate was physical.

The three of us would prepare dinner together, often making light of the physical contact our small kitchen engendered. I learned to roll with the flirtatious nature of the two women; first,

I hadn't known how to think about it, but I talked at length about the kisses and touching with Allison one weekend and she told me to just accept it as a natural boy-girl interaction. She encouraged me to flirt back with Kate and her, so I gradually learned a few skills in this new area, for instance, how to gently touch Kate in a proper but suggestive way, or how to bend into her personal space as I listened to her every word. Allison would sometimes give me little hints about what I should have done to spice up a situation. I'd often practice on her before trying some suggestive words or behavior on Kate. Sometimes, I'd muff my lines or what I was supposed to do. My audience would dissolve into gales of laughter, often when I'd over-play my part, and then they would make me try the whole flirtatious gesture again. I joined in the laughter, realizing as I did that I no longer dreaded mishandling a situation like this, at least with my close friends.

After most dinners, I'd often leave the two women so I could put in a few more hours of studying in my make shift den before bedtime. They'd talk to each with animated voices, their laughter often peeling through the house. Sometimes when I'd take a break, I'd come out and find them deeply engrossed in some discussion, often holding hands with each other or massaging each other's shoulders.

Kate's departure in the evenings always involved a goodnight kiss. If I were studying, she'd come into my small den and press her body into my back as I sat hunched over a book or my laptop. She'd kiss my ear, even nibbling on my lobe, and then pull my chair out from the desk. She'd then sit in my lap and give me a soul-searing kiss of epic proportions. She could get me panting in thirty seconds. Often, she'd say something like, "Dream of me tonight, Lover," and then be gone. I assured her I always dreamed about her, a statement I found embarrassing to admit given how intensely I felt about Allison.

In November, Allison and Kate declared it was Dance Month at the house. They'd discovered that I had never learned how to dance, and so the pair took it upon themselves to correct this huge omission in my education. Several times a week they'd take turns teaching me new dance steps and getting me to relax into the rhythm of one or another of the dances they felt I should know. I, of course, took delight in holding Allison close to me, especially when she taught me how to slow dance and we kissed, even with Kate watching us and smiling. Not surprisingly, Kate taxed me with the same swinging, swaying, and kissing when we slow danced. She often stole a kiss from me as Allison smiled her consent. I confess I enjoyed my lessons, however, as the month went on I felt I had to spend more time studying in anticipation of end of term exams before Christmas. The girls promised me the three of us would do something that required dancing for New Year's Eve so I'd have to display my new skills in public.

One time when I got home from work, Allison wasn't there but Kate was. She greeted me with a sizzling kiss and ground her hips into mine in a highly sexual way. She said in a serious voice, "Would you like to make love to me before Allison gets home? She won't

mind you know.” I was dumbfounded. Yes, I wanted to make love to her, but no I wouldn’t do it; I loved Allison.

Kate pulled me down onto our sofa amid my mild protests. I wanted her, but I couldn’t. I thought I understood the rules; this wasn’t in the rulebook. She took one of my hands and placed it under her blouse; she was braless. I recoiled slightly, but Kate kissed me again, running her tongue into my mouth. I met her ardor with my own. For perhaps two minutes I allowed myself to feel Kate’s breasts and enjoy her passionate kisses. Then guilt swept over me, and I leapt up in a panic and announced I needed to start dinner. Kate laughed at my discomfort, and then joined me in the kitchen, often sweeping her hands around my body and kissing me again. She continued even after Allison got home with a few groceries. I thought her incorrigible.

Later, after Allison and I had made love, I confessed what I’d done and how I felt about Kate to her. She smiled knowingly at me and said, “It’s normal, Joel. Kate’s a big flirt in many ways, plus she deeply cares about you. I know she’s not out to steal you away from me, so if you find her attractive that’s fine. I know how you look at her sometimes. I like that you like her, and that we include her so much in what we do. I like that you kiss her too. You have my permission to flirt back in equal measure. I promise I won’t be mad.” I felt relieved that she wasn’t angered by my feelings and what I’d done, but I still felt conflicted about how I felt about the two women, or perhaps I should say, how I thought I should feel. This was some area in my life that I likely would have resolved years earlier but for my unusual upbringing.

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Two events late that year completed the most complex and convolved year of my life, and in some regards the life of anyone else I’d ever known. The first happened at Thanksgiving. Since I didn’t have family, Allison invited me to go to her parent’s house for the holiday. By this time, I’d been living with their daughter for over five months. I knew I would be on display, and that they would both be making an assessment as to my suitability as a future husband or live-in lover of their daughter. I wanted to make a good impression, but my self-confidence seemed to evaporate as the date for our visit got closer.

Allison was sympathetic to my plight and assured me that her parents would love me the same way she did. She also reassured me that she was the one living with me and loving me and not them, so she didn’t particularly care what they thought anyway. Regardless of what she said, my stomach slowly twisted itself into a knot, particularly as we drove up Interstate 85 towards the suburb of Washington where they lived the day before Thanksgiving Day.

In my mind, within the first half-hour of our arrival, I would likely be told to pack up and leave the house and to never see their daughter again. I would be chastised for living out of wedlock with her these many months, failing to provide her a ‘rich’ life style – a life style to which she was entitled. I would be told I had inadequate upbringing and lineage, a rotten

personality, no hope of getting ahead, that they knew all my bad habits and couldn't tolerate any of them, and that if I weren't moving fast enough they had a shotgun full of buckshot that could stimulate my departure.

I knew that Allison had a close relationship with her mother. She telephoned her at least once a week, often sharing some of our activities. I guessed that my entire lineage and background had been shared as well. I agreed with the 'no secrets' philosophy, but thought that these mysterious people I'd never met might use it against me.

Their modest suburban Virginia home was crisply maintained and landscaped. We parked in the driveway. The day was chilly and partly sunny. I was hot, and my palms were sweaty. I could barely breathe. I briefly wondered why I hadn't jumped off the bridge. Allison came around the car and kissed me. She told me, "You'll do fine. Just relax." She surreptitiously patted my backside.

The front door opened, and a fifty-ish carbon-copy of Allison appeared with a broad smile. Allison's Mom came up to me, pulled me to her and gave me a polite hug of welcome. I was appropriately embarrassed. An older man with salt and pepper hair soon appeared, also with a big smile and a handshake that nearly crumpled my hand. They helped us in with our bags putting us, no questions asked, in two separate bedrooms! Allison rolled her eyes at me, but seemed to accept the situation, so I did too.

We gathered for afternoon tea in their sunroom. I complimented them on their home, something that apparently was the right thing to say. Arnold, Allison's father, was a home handyman, and did all his own work and painting. Martha, her mother, had done all the decorating. We exhausted our small talk about an hour later. I'd lasted twice as long as I'd thought I would. I also silently congratulated myself for having nerves of steel for sitting there and fielding so many questions about my family and background. I could tell by some of their dour expressions that they were less than pleased I hadn't been more of a success.

We moved into the cocktail hour, and I'd never been so glad for something alcoholic in my life. My palms were still sweaty. I continued to be politely interviewed about my life story and how I was taking to college life as an older student. My ultimate career plans also came into the picture. Allison stood behind her parents and rolled her eyes at their questions as they grilled me. Her humor helped lighten the mood and made the tension I felt in meeting bearable.

Before our visit, Allison had told me about her parents. They were strict, and both she and her older sister couldn't wait to leave home. She explained they had a rule for everything, often based on some obscure and irrelevant statement from the Bible. As an example, she told me her father had found some Old Testament statement he chose to interpret in a way that meant she couldn't get her driver's license until she was seventeen and completed a

driver's education course. She described her mother as a submissive to her father's dominance and dictates.

Dinner was a real struggle for me. This was the most difficult social situation I had ever been in. I wanted to make a good showing not only for my own sense of self-esteem, but also to prove that I was a worthy suitor to their daughter. Unfortunately, Allison's father steered the conversation into religion, politics, and hunting.

Somehow, I managed to duck taking a firm stand on any of his goading topics. I'd never cared much for politics; admitted needing to spend more time being religious, conceding that I hoped Allison would give me some ideas in this part of my life; and deferred to Arnold's experience in hunting, since I'd never had the money or time to spend in the recreational endeavor. While the answers were not pleasing to the man, he accepted that I might be redeemable in some way.

Allison's father held strong opinions on every subject that came up, opinions that he felt were 'right' to the exclusion of all others. There was no give or take to our conversation; he'd announce the 'obviously correct' point of view, to which the rest of us would accede. Even in areas he was not educated or experienced in he had strong opinions; for instance, he picked apart the pros and cons of my studying computer science as a major, finally declaring the field worthy as a career track.

By the end of dinner, I had a migraine, however, I helped clear the table and then joined Dad to watch some television. After a while, Allison came and suggested that we go to bed so we would be rested the next day and ready to meet the other relatives.

As I followed Allison upstairs, my headache went away and the stress drained from my body. She followed me into my assigned bedroom and closed the door. She pushed her body against mine and said with a smile, "They love you. You did so well with them. My Mom used the words 'suave' and a 'perfect gentleman' to describe you. You can relax now; you passed your test."

If there was a test to be passed, I suspected I was getting D-plus grades on it, at least as far as Allison's father was concerned. I felt my discourse with him was far from ideal, and the verbal and body language feedback I got showed he was less than pleased at many of my responses. My girlfriend was being overly optimistic about my receptivity by her parents. I couldn't do much about it, but be myself.

Allison assured me with lots of kisses and suggestive words that she loved me, and what her parents thought, didn't count for naught in our relationship. She confessed her own frustration with her father's narrow-mindedness and confrontational interrogation techniques. Moreover, she assured me that she didn't want to live any closer to them than we did; she fled their home and upbringing as soon as she could, and didn't want to return to that

atmosphere. A few mandatory holiday visits were required, but other than that, she assured me, we'd be on our own in every way we could imagine. After we made out for a little while and I felt better about things, Allison bid me goodnight and disappeared to her own bedroom. I slept fitfully, worried about whether, if ever, I could redeem myself in her parent's eyes.

The next day I met more of Allison's family. Her aunt, uncle, and cousin Caitlin arrived. Caitlin was in college studying English, however, she didn't know what she wanted to do after graduation in two years. Caitlin was shorter than I was, but weighed about the same. Brianna, Allison's sister, and her boyfriend showed up. She worked as an analyst at the CIA and so talking about her job ceased to be a viable topic of conversation. The boyfriend, Matt, was between jobs, however, I also got the impression he also worked for the Agency – at least part time, whatever that meant. Brianna and Allison looked very much alike, and I took joy in studying the two women side-by-side when they were together in the same room. At least with the other people in the house, I became less the focus of attention.

During the day, the men gravitated to the television set and watched football games while the women gabbed and worked on the big dinner in the kitchen. I feigned interest in sports, although I felt guilty for not studying in prep for the coming exam period. Allison checked in with me periodically, making sure I was surviving all her relatives. She was solicitous about my welfare, and often gave me some little sign of her love, such as a wink, a touch of my cheek or a squeeze of my shoulder.

Thanksgiving dinner was a splendid affair. The focus shifted to the meal and the effort the women had mustered in preparing it. If anything, the dinner table conversation was bland, except for occasional pronouncements by Allison's father about some topic of conversation. I feigned fatigue and went to bed early, after all of the other guests had left. I did go to bed, but studied for an hour about the basics of computer operating systems.

Friday, I suggested to Arnold that I help him with some of the projects around the house that needed two people to perform. He thought that a redeeming gesture, and soon I found myself cleaning gutters, carrying firewood into the house, and raking leaves in the yard. Somehow, I managed to duck further interrogations or controversial topics of conversation the entire day. In the end, I thought my stock might have advanced slightly, perhaps to a C-minus.

We drove home on Saturday, all of us declaring the visit to have been a good one. I was invited back for Christmas and warmly accepted Arnold and Martha's kind invitation. In fact, I was mentally exhausted from the visit and couldn't wait to leave their house. A block away, Allison assured me she felt the same way.

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Kate, who returned before us, welcomed us back to Chapel Hill with a special meal she prepared at her apartment. The evening was relaxed and even romantic. I felt she was

seducing both Allison and me with her soft words, her glances, and her touches and kisses. She also saw that our wine glasses were never empty. After dinner, she positioned the three of us on the sofa; the two women nestled in my arms as we watched a movie. Both Allison and Kate kissed me frequently, apparently to the enjoyment of each other.

After Thanksgiving, there were two more weeks of classes and then a week of final exams. I had the option to cut back on my work schedule so I could study and finish some term papers, however, for some reason, I didn't think it important enough to mention to Allison. The following Thursday afternoon, instead of going to work after my last morning class, I headed home, figuring I'd get at least four hours of uninterrupted studying in before Allison got home from work. As it turned out, this is when the last life-changing event of that year occurred.

As I got near the house, I was surprised to see Allison's car in the driveway. She hadn't mentioned coming home for lunch, and I wondered if she felt all right. I was even more surprised when I went in the house and heard moaning coming from our bedroom. Unsure of what was happening, I walked down the short hallway to our bedroom, my footsteps cushioned on the hallway carpeting.

There on our king-size bed were two nude forms lost in the throes of feminine lovemaking – Allison and Kate. I stood frozen at the door, no doubt with that deer in the headlight look on my face. The Sapphic scene was unbelievably erotic, yet my mind screamed inside my head about the infidelity that was taking place. All my senses pleaded with me to reverse the day, to make the images disappear, to erase the memory of the events I witnessed.

The women hadn't heard me come to the door. They writhed into the ministrations each gave to the other as their lips, tongues, and hands danced energetically over each other's bodies. Allison's moans of joy filled the room. I heard Kate urging Allison to let herself go – to give into the pleasures she delivered.

The scene unfolded before me in slow motion as I remembered it later. Every touch and every nuance of their lovemaking came to me. This wasn't the first time they'd been together; they knew each other's bodies and how to pleasure them.

Then I focused on the words being said. They weren't only words of lust and passion, but also words of love, compassion, tenderness, and a need to be together. I heard Allison's voice so clearly, "Oh, Kate. I love you so. Love me. More. Harder."

My beautiful friend Kate, confidant to the two of us, whispered back, "Allison, you are my true love – my love of a lifetime. Let me make you happy one more time." She worked at Allison's sex with renewed vigor.

Two long minutes passed by as I watched and listened to the women pleasuring each other. Was I just a voyeur – a pervert enjoying the lesbian scene? No, I was numb. My brain slowly restarted processing after the shock of what was happening only a dozen feet in front of my eyes. A flurry of options presented themselves to me.

Kate finally raised her head from the part of Allison she'd been pleasuring. At first, she was startled when she saw me; then she said, "Uh Oh," in a loud voice.

"What's wrong?" Allison asked from her supine position.

Kate didn't answer her. Instead, she said in a halting voice that clearly recognized she'd been caught in a compromising situation, "Hi Joel. How long have you been there?" As she spoke she rolled her nude body from Allison in a way that completely revealed herself to me. She sat so that Allison could see me. Allison looked at me with an astonished expression on her face. Her mouth moved, but no words came out.

I turned and walked out of the bedroom. I picked up my textbooks and notes, and walked out of the house. I got in my car and drove away, aware that in my rear view mirror, Allison had burst out of the house wearing her robe and waving wildly at me to stop.

I drove around for half an hour, but never left Carrboro – our little town. My cell phone kept ringing, so I turned it off; all the calls were from Allison or Kate. Eventually, I stopped at a place called Linda's Bar and went in and got a boilermaker. I drank the first one in ten seconds and ordered another right away. The combination of beer and Jack Daniels took me back to my first days working at the paper mill when some of the workers there felt they had to initiate me into their throng. They got me drunker than a skunk and then dropped me home on my front porch to sleep it off. I had a hangover for three days.

I tried to digest what I'd seen; almost wishing I'd wake up from this nightmare. Could Allison really have been doing that with Kate? Did my eyes really see their acts? Had my ears really heard their intonations of love? As I replayed the scene, I let myself slide into an alcoholic haze. After the second boilermaker I gave my car keys to the bartender and asked her to make sure I didn't kill myself. What a change from six months earlier when I stood on the bridge back home, only seconds from leaping to my death.

I sat in a darkened corner of the bar, and fortunately it was a slow afternoon. I cried and had a third drink – and then a fourth. I had tears running down my cheeks. I felt betrayed by the one person I'd ever allowed myself to love or be loved by. I even felt betrayed by Kate, my dear friend – our friend; the other woman I liked so much. As the alcoholic haze swept me into a more distant place, I wondered if I'd feel the same if I'd found Allison fucking some other guy instead of her best friend.

I wondered how long Allison's affair with Kate had been going on. Did it go back to when they first met four months earlier? They worked together. Had Allison been trying to tell me something was going on when she started her dirty talk about having Kate make love with me – with us? Would I ever know the truth or the answers to all the crazy questions that kept popping up in my mind?

I took a piece of paper and started to write down all the questions I had and the things that worried me about what had taken place. I spilled beer on the paper, and the ink ran. Later, I realized I'd just crumpled up the paper and left it to be cleaned up. Shortly after that, the barmaid told me I had to drink coffee rather than beer and Jack Daniels. I accepted her edict and switched to coffee.

About six o'clock, the nice bartender pushed a cheeseburger and fries in my face. I hadn't ordered it, but she said she could tell I hadn't eaten all day and needed something to absorb some of the alcohol I'd consumed. I thanked her in my slurred voice and ate some of it until my stomach revolted, and I thought I'd throw up. A few minutes later, the nausea passed.

When the barmaid was clearing some of my glasses and the plate away, the bar action had slowed; she asked, "Do you want to talk about it? Girl problems?"

I nodded and said flatly in my slurred voice, "Came home; found my partner making love with her girlfriend. Don't know what to do."

The barkeep raised her eyebrows and just said, "Wow! Let me think about that one. I've never heard of *that* situation." She went away and busied herself behind the bar for a few minutes. Eventually, she came back to me and asked, "Do you have anyone you can talk to? A friend? Someone else you trust?"

I thought for a while and said, "Stone Goodman. Do you have a phone book?" She brought me the area phone book, and fortunately there was only one 'Goodman, S.' in the book.

I dialed my English prof's phone and was rewarded with a cheery, "Hello." His voice was unmistakable whether in the front of the class or over the telephone.

"Perfesser Goodman, thiss is Joel Young, and I really need your help in a saa-sensitive personal matter." I struggled to keep the alcoholic slur out of my voice.

Stone said, "Joel, where are you? I can tell you're not at home."

I answered, "I'm at a bar called Linda's near the campus. I must confess, I've been drinking, yet I really need your help. I'm drinking coffee now, but I had a shitty afternoon." I grinned at the seemingly profound label I'd applied to the time since I'd walked out of my house.

“Joel, stay there. I know the bar, and I’ll be down there in fifteen minutes.” We ended the call, and I sat there taking deep breaths trying to sober up. I had another cup of coffee. As I sat there alone, another wave of depression swept over me. I had this ‘Why me?’ feeling someone gets when they’re victimized. I got all teary again.

The next I knew; Stone slid onto the bar stool next to me. He was even wearing his tweed sport coat. I wiped the tears from my cheeks with my sleeve. He nodded to barmaid, and she brought him a Blue Moon Ale. Apparently, he was better known here than I realized.

He said, “All right, the only reason I can think you’d be in this state is if something happened between you and Allison. Am I right?”

I nodded and started to him the story of my homecoming as another round of tears ran down my cheek. Stone just nodded and sipped his beer. He knew everyone involved. I told him, “I came home for lunch and to study. Normally, I’d go to work at my job, but I’d reduced my hours so I had time to write a paper. I guess I wasn’t noisy when I pulled up to the house, or even when I came in. I’d seen Allison’s car and expected her to be in the kitchen having lunch since she was home.”

I paused and wiped my nose on a paper napkin. “Anyway, as I put my books down, I heard a groan from the bedroom. It was a woman’s cry, and as I think about it, I knew it had some sexual content. You know our house; I walked down the short hallway to the bedroom. Kate and Allison were on the bed – nude. Allison was lying on her back eating Kate’s cunt, and Kate was on top eating Allison and thrusting her fingers into her.”

Stone’s eyes got about as big around as saucers. I recalled for a second a remark he’d made in class about sex always capturing the attention of everyone, despite their point of view.

I rolled my eyes up to the ceiling and took a deep breath so I could go on: “I froze when I saw them. I think my brain actually stopped working. I went numb all over. I still feel tingly; almost as though my nerves were dead and they’re coming back to life, but some of that might be all the boilermakers I drank. They didn’t see me for a couple of minutes. They just kept pleasuring each other. Then Kate saw me. She said something to warn Allison, and they parted. About then, I left. I drove around until I came here.”

I asked with a plaintive tone to my voice, “Stone, what should I do? I love her so.”

He asked, “Do you love Kate?”

I thought for a minute and said, “I love Allison. Why’d she do this to me?” My tears started again, and I snuffled into the old napkin some more. Stone handed me a pile of paper napkins from behind the bar.

He asked again, “How do you feel about Kate? Do you love her too?”

I snuffled out an answer, “I don’t know. I felt chemistry with her from the moment I met her, just like I did with Allison. We even have kissed a few times. She’s my girlfriend’s best friend. She’s smart, nice, and pretty, ... but, I never ...” My voice trailed off in thought. I realized I did have feelings for Kate. I nodded the rest of my reply to Stone.

Stone drank his beer and then said, “I think you have a number of options: one, you can leave and never go back; two, you can go back home and insist she never see Kate again; three, you could go back and insist the three of you become a package; or fourth, ... well, right now I can’t think of a fourth.”

He went on, “If you leave, you lose the love of your life. You end up punishing yourself, because of what she did. She might feel punished too, for a little while, but there’s no guarantee she’d feel that way. She might go off with Kate into a lesbian relationship and live happily ever after, and where would you be?”

Stone continued, “In option three, Allison and Kate may or may not want you to be a party to their relationship, and either or both of them may not want to engage in a threesome. You won’t know until you ask them. Threesomes are fraught with problems, just to warn you. I lived in one for seven years many years ago. It worked splendidly for a while, and then petty jealousies crept into the relationship and things fell apart. We’d taken our ability to communicate well for granted, and in the end we didn’t.”

I asked out of curiosity, “Did you love your partners?”

“Oh, very much so,” Stone lamented. “I hurt for years afterward, and I know the two women did too. We each blamed the other two. Breaking up was one of the biggest mistakes in my life. I could have ... no, should have lived with them forever.” He paused and then went on, “Let’s see, oh, yes, option two, go and insist that Allison renounce Kate and remain forever faithful to you alone.”

He looked at me over the top of his half glasses. He chuckled, and soon he had me smiling too.

I finally said, “Pretty unrealistic, huh?”

Stone was still smiling and said, “You can’t control another person, and you certainly can’t guarantee their fidelity or how they think. From what I know of Allison and Kate and what you told me, I’d say they love each other and have grown closer and closer over the months since you moved here. If you ask her to give up her friend, it would set up a situation where she would probably sneak behind your back to see someone she really liked, feel badly for it,

and then ultimately leave you, because you made her feel guilty about liking her friend. They work together; they see each other every day – probably every hour. I don't like option two – or option one.

"

I was surprised where that left me. "You mean I should go home, with hat in hand, and ask Allison ... I'd ask her for admittance to ... to her relationship with Kate ... or ... what would I ask for?"

Stone threw back his head and laughed. Though his laughter he said, "What did you learn in my course this semester? I even talked about it at your cookout." He grinned at me, and his eyes sparkled with mischief.

I thought for a moment and started to answer slowly, "Well, you emphasized that we had to do unorthodox things to get by in today's world, and you showed us in our reading that's always been the case – even back in the 1800s. You had us read Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* – the characters all had to adapt to a rapidly changing situation every day."

I thought for some more and then continued, "You had us read Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* and those poems; they all emphasized that we shouldn't let what's happened in the past or our worries about the future impact what we think or do today."

Stone stopped me. He said, "Do you remember your cookout when we were sitting on your back deck, I told you more about this – about seeing the beauty in the present moment?"

"You said the only things or events that are bad are those we label that way. The only bad thoughts are the ones we tell ourselves are bad. In class, we focused on that passage from *Hamlet*, 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.' We judge things in the 'now' with the baggage or experiences of the past – often inappropriately. You also said, 'the greatest sin is the unlived life.'"

"Very good," Stone said with a tilt of his nearly empty beer bottle towards me. He nodded to the barmaid, who brought him another beer.

"And third?" Stone asked after we paused. He gave me a patronizing grim, but I didn't mind. He was reminding me of some important things that I needed to know about my future life with Allison.

I stated, "You proved to me that we all have a dark side, and that we are full of polar opposites – full of contrasts. We read Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*, and learned how Jack Burden tried to cope with the good and dark sides of his boss, Willie Stark. All the characters had good and bad sides to them, even Burden."

“And so what?” Goodman asked bluntly, just the way he sometimes accosted the class I was in.

I had to think, “Well, we have to accept our dark sides – and we may even need to accept them in others.”

“Do you have to accept everyone’s dark side?”

“No,” I replied quickly, “Just those in the people you love.” The statement brought me to a standstill. I was shocked at the revelation I’d just made. I thought for a moment and said, “If I love Allison, maybe I’ve got to accept this side of her. I don’t have to like it, only accept it.”

Stone smiled. He could see my epiphany. He pushed further, “What about your own dark side? What did you feel when you saw the two women naked on the bed?”

I blushed, but realized my lustful reaction was probably normal. I said, “I wanted to fuck the two of them – to plunder them – to make them pay for the other feelings they gave me. I even wanted to hit them with my belt the way I’d been whacked as a kid when I’d been bad.”

Stone engaged me, “Sounds pretty dark to me. It’s nice that you can admit you have both sides within you as well, if indeed this was even a dark moment for Allison.” He paused and then expanded the thought, “Allison might see her relationship with Kate as elevating herself to a new, lighter, freer self – more in love and loving, more spiritual, and more compassionate, even than with you. You may be the only person applying the ‘dark’ label to the event you walked in on at lunch today.”

I studied Stone and nodded in understanding.

He continued, “What about the relevance to you – to this situation – of the other two themes of my course?” He sipped his beer, and I caught him admiring the barmaid’s rear end.

I went on, “I’ve always felt my past held me back. I blamed all sorts of things for how I ended up. I’d become a victim of my own life. I renounced control. Allison helped me see that, and pulled me into ‘the now.’ I still carry luggage as my shrink calls it and a bag of excuses, and I’ve got to let them go. I’m working on that - everyday. You can’t imagine how far I’ve come in the past nine months – since I met Allison.”

“What baggage are you carrying about Allison ... and Kate ... about what you saw today? Will all this become the baggage of the future?”

I looked at him hard. He was twisting the knife in my fresh wound and making me think hard about today’s situation. We were quiet for a moment, and I slowly started to answer as

the thoughts came to me, “I wasn’t loved as a child or teen. My parents didn’t express love at all. Being unloved is part of my baggage. For a long time, it made me a hermit, because I was more afraid of the rejection I’d find in the world than the acceptance. Today, I felt that I wasn’t loved because of what Allison and Kate were doing, plus I was excluded. The event was between the two of them, and I heard them say they loved each other.”

Stone nodded partial understanding and asked pointedly, “Are you unloved by Allison ... by Kate?”

I blanched and said slowly, “I don’t know.”

“What should you do about that?” He asked in quick reply.

“I guess I should ask her ... both of them.”

Stone said, “You made an assumption when you heard Allison say she loved Kate. What was it?”

I thought for a minute and then answered slowly, “I assumed that meant she didn’t love me.”

Stone smiled again and said, “Good assumption?”

I shook my head, “Won’t know until I ask her I guess. She may love both of us, and for that matter Kate might too.”

Stone nodded to indicate I’d given a good answer. After a minute he pushed in a new direction, “How do you feel about being straight or gay, or about lesbians or bisexuals?”

I’d never thought about the subject. I sipped my lukewarm coffee to gain a moment to think through my answer. I knew I was straight, but I’d never thought of it as an option the way Stone had phrased the question; it hadn’t been a choice, it was just the way I was, but now I saw it as a choice. Finally, I said, “I think it’s up to each couple – male or female; you know ‘in the privacy of their own bedroom’ I think it should be their right to do as they please.”

I went on, “I couldn’t be gay; it’s not in me. I can appreciate that some men will be attracted to each other, even love each other, but I don’t think of men that way. I think it’s easier for women to be in a relationship with one another; they’re more outgoing and sharing, plus men have more stigmas attached to pairing than women do. As for bisexual men or women, I guess the same statements apply.”

Stone turned to me sharply, “You’re making assumptions again. You assumed a relationship has to be among a couple. Does it?”

“No,” I answered, wanting to please the professor. “I’ve just never known anyone – except you – that’s lived intimately with more than one person at the same time.”

Stone challenged me further, “What about the Bible? You must have been raised to be a God-fearing young man. Do you know what the Bible says about homosexuality? By some accounts, it’s forbidden, even punishable by death.” He was grinning at me towards the end of his taunts.

“Yes, I know,” I replied, firm on my understanding of the book. “I just don’t give the book credence two or three thousand years after it was written. Besides, the Bible also says divorce is forbidden, couples can’t have intercourse during a woman’s period; adulterers should be stoned to death as well as women who turn out not to be virgin brides. I don’t believe in selective enforcement – some laws versus others.” I thought for a minute and added, “Times have changed. I’m not sure I want to be subjected to any religion’s set of laws; those are the province of governments.”

Stone asked, “Could you live with two women ... love two women ... day in, day out?”

My head jerked up at the thought. I hadn’t seen myself with that level of involvement with Allison and Kate. I looked at Stone and slowly said, “Yeah. Yes, I guess I could. I’m just getting started for the first time in my life loving one woman, let alone two.” I thought for a minute and asked Stone, “How did you do it? You said you loved two women.”

Stone ruminated, “It’s not all sexual you know. At your age that’s important, but as you get older or are in a longer term relationship, the sex plays less of a role. It’s about being together, companionship, emotional support, sharing, reaching out to the other people you love in a thousand different ways, and maybe even loving them in different ways.”

“I know that,” I told him. “Everyone gets hung up on the sex. I’m still getting used to it with Allison.”

Stone went on, “When we started it was about sex. Monica and I were already in a relationship when Tara came into our lives. We were all risk takers and willing to experiment. Sex was another way we could play together, except we all fell in love with each other. Then, Tara moved in with us. Questions came up like how to sleep together, what rules do we have about making love, how do we share household chores, what we’d do about children, and so forth.”

“How’d you settle those?”

“We talked a lot at first. These were the easy questions to solve as it turned out, but they seemed so daunting at the time. Over time, we slacked off on talking together. We stopped

sharing our emotions and our fantasies with each other, then, slowly, arguments started, sides were taken on one issue or another, and things fell apart.”

“Did Monica and Tara ever make love without you? How did you feel?”

“Oh, yes,” Stone smiled apparently relishing a visual memory. “I wanted them to pleasure each other. I discovered that after they did, they really wanted me in a very carnal sense. Occasionally, I’d walk in on them – just as you did with Kate and Allison today – only I knew I could join in if I wanted to, and usually I did.”

“What happened after it ended?”

“Oh, I dated for a while, trying to recapture the feeling of love I had in that relationship. I never did. I remarried for a while. A third of second marriages fail, and mine was one of them. I vowed never to marry again, and I haven’t. I’ve now lived ten years with a lovely woman that puts up with my terrible idiosyncrasies - Gale. I’ve never told her, but she reminds me so much of Monica.”

“I’ll never tell a soul,” I assured him.

Stone nodded with a satisfied look on his face, adjusted to a more alert posture, and then bore into my bleeding wound yet again: “And, based on all that, what should you be prepared to do in line with the first theme in my course – living an unorthodox life?”

I responded thoughtfully, “I guess I should be prepared for whatever outcome might result: moving on with my own life, continuing to love Allison – and even Kate, or figuring out how to love the two of them together. I need to be open to possibilities.”

Stone had a look of tremendous satisfaction on his face. He said to me with a smug look on his face, “You make teaching so worthwhile. How long since your last drink?”

“Over three hours. The barmaid made me switch to coffee. She told me she didn’t want to clean up after me. She made me eat too.”

“You sober enough to drive and make it through a sobriety test if you get stopped?”

I nodded.

He gestured to barmaid, “Stacy, this lad needs his car keys. He’s on a mission of love.” I noted that Stone knew the barmaid by name.

She grinned and tossed my keys to me. She said, “Good luck, but somehow, I don’t think you’ll need it.” We smiled at each other. We both left some money and a generous tip on the bar and walked out together. The night was brisk.

Stone said, “I agree with what Stacy said to you: ‘Good luck ... but I don’t think you’ll need it.’ I expect to be informed about how things work out.” He smiled at me in a fatherly way. “Go and see the woman you love – the women you love.”

We shook hands, and I thanked him so much for his help. He brushed off the effort, and we parted. I got in my car and headed home. Somewhere between the boilermakers and the coffee plus my conversation with Stone, I had found renewed self-confidence to face this situation, despite what the outcome would be.

As I made the fifteen-minute drive back to the house, I thought about Stone’s reassurance about my self-confidence. I pondered why I felt I had self-confidence now, but didn’t have any for all those years growing up and as a young adult on my own. Now I faced one of the toughest situations anyone could face, something with an uncertain outcome. Yet, I had considered many options going into the situation and how I would respond, I had a general plan, and a positive demeanor. I would not let any part of this situation or any result of the situation depress me or ruin my life. I would move on with *élan* despite the outcome. I was informed, prepared, and ready to accept what came.

EXTENSION

I pulled my car in the driveway of our rental house at nine-thirty. Allison was huddled on the doorstep of the house staring out into the night. The telephone sat beside her. She jumped to attention when she saw my car pull into the driveway. She stood there, uncertain about how to act as I got out of the car and walked towards her. I could tell she'd been crying. From the circle of Kleenex around where she was sitting, she'd been waiting outside on the doorstep for several hours.

She spoke with an edgy and halting voice as I approached, "Joel, I'm so sorry ... I ... I ... I want to explain if you'll give me a chance." I'd never seen her with such a sad face. She twisted a tissue in her hands as she spoke in a gesture of her nervousness.

I strode up to her and wrapped my arms around her in a bear hug. I kissed her forehead. Allison put her head against my chest and started crying, huge sobs that racked her body. I told her in my boldest voice, "Allison Millman, I love you more than anything else in this entire universe – even more than I love myself. I love everything you say, and even everything you do. Now come and tell me what's going on."

Allison sobbed uncontrollably as my sincere words of love reached her ears. I wasn't sure if this was a good sign or a bad sign, so I steeled myself for whatever might come. She held onto me for dear life as we stood in the yard, the only light coming from the yellow porch light beside the front door.

She made several attempts to stop crying, and I kept telling her that it was 'all right' and that I loved her. I started to tell her all the things she'd done that I was grateful for: saving me on the bridge that night nine months earlier, the magnificent meals she cooked for me, her enthusiastic and creative lessons in lovemaking, helping me out of my shell socially, her friends – including Kate – who I really loved, coming with me to Chapel Hill and living with me, helping me get into the University and get into a rhythm with my study habits, sharing the expenses on the house, helping me sell my old house and move, ... I went on and on, and Allison got quieter and quieter as her weeping slowed.

My shirt was soaked with her tears when she pulled away, apparently more in control of herself. I allowed her to lead me into the house and into the living room. She had me sit on our sofa and then lay down with her head in my lap. She started to cry again, only this time she managed to get a few words out: "I ... I ... I ... thought ... I thought I'd lost you." She bawled again, awkwardly hugging my torso to her and trying to talk all at the same time: "I'm ... I'm so sorry."

I asked, "Allison, do you love me?"

She jerked away and sat bolt upright as though I had hit her. “Oh, my God, YES,” She affirmed; “I love you more than anything.” She threw herself into my arms and hugged me the hardest ever.

“Do you love Kate?” I asked softly over her shoulder.

She hesitated in thought and whispered as she pulled away slightly, “Yes, ... but not as much as you.” We both allowed silence to fill the space and then she added, as she looked me in the eye, “If you want, I’ll never see her again.” Tears ran down her cheeks.

I shook my head and said, “Allison, I want you to see Kate again, particularly if you feel that way about her.”

She pulled further away from me with a surprised expression on her face, tears still flowing. She studied the sincerity of my remark. To lighten the mood, I leaned forward and kissed the end of her pert little nose.

“You mean that?” She asked incredulously.

“Absolutely,” I avowed. I went on, “When I left here at one o’clock after seeing the two of you in bed, I ended up in a bar near campus. I drank most of the afternoon and got stinking drunk. I was selfish. All I could think about was losing you. My ego hurt. I would have kept going except the barmaid stopped serving me booze, fed me and then started giving me black coffee. She had me call Stone Goodman, so he came down and talked to me for a while.”

Allison said in a weepy tone, “Oh no, they’ll all think I’m a slut and so bad to you.”

I consoled her, “No, not at all. Stone made me see that if I loved you, my focus should be on your happiness not on mine. That was only one of many epiphanies I had this evening as we talked. Stone walked me through my options, and then helped me see what I had to do.”

“What’s that?” She asked in a worried tone.

“Come and talk to you – and Kate. To see where you are, or we are, or all of us are in our thinking and where we’re going to take our relationships. To be a party to the decision with an open mind, particularly about coming up with unusual ways to think about all this or novel ways to solve whatever problems there are.”

“You ... you ... you don’t think I’m terrible?”

I shook my head. “I wish we’d talked about it ahead of time, but then I would have given you some staid answers that wouldn’t, in the long run, have served any of us. I wouldn’t

have agreed, and you would have been frustrated and mad at me in one way or another because I shut you off from your friend – your lover.” We had another silence, and then I said, “When you’re ready, I’d like to hear about it – your relationship with Kate that is.” I looked at her with anticipation.

Part of me continued screaming about the infidelity that had taken place, and how what had happened just proved that I wasn’t worthy of having a relationship with a woman. I watched the performance of that actor, and then decided that Stone was right; I could shut off those voices and substitute more reasoned, thoughtful, and loving voices. I did just that and felt the tension drain from my body as my dramatic actors gave up their tantrums.

Allison nodded, and two more tears rolled down her flushed cheeks. She said, “You know I met Kate the first week at my new job. We’re in the same department and see each other every day. And, you know we pretty quickly became best friends. Well, best friends usually share some of themselves with each other, but not everything. However, we began to share everything as the months went by. We had no secrets. In fact, the only secrets I kept from her involved your early life; that was for you to approve telling her not me – and you did.”

She sighed and continued, “We became closer and closer, in one sense like sisters and in another like lovers. It wasn’t the same kind of love you and I felt for each other. There were – or are – just different feelings and emotions involved. We didn’t just hop into bed one day on a whim. I told her I loved her one-day, and she told me she felt the same. We started to touch each other more and more, and then we shared kisses.”

She sighed again; “And then, about a month ago, Kate told me she wanted to make love to me – to be intimate. I told her I wasn’t sure, that I wanted to think about it. And I did. The magnetic pull to be with her was so overpowering, so I said yes and that I could hardly wait. I wanted to talk to you so badly, but ... but I didn’t know how ... what I could say that would produce the result I wanted, and that wouldn’t throw away what we’ve built – what you’ve accomplished for yourself.”

I asked, “And I was wrapped up in schoolwork and ignoring you?”

“Yes and no,” Allison said. “I could have – should have – said something, but ... well I was worried about how you’d take it – that it’d drive you back into a depression. I also thought Kate and I would do something, and then it would be over with. I figured it would be a one-time thing, and we’d get past it, but as it turns out, we want to be together more and more. Only I want to be with you too, more and more, and forever.” She looked at me with big doe eyes. She tightly squeezed my hand to confirm her statement.

I said evenly, “So you made love?”

“About three weeks ago for the first time; two weeks before Thanksgiving. We took an afternoon of comp time and went to Kate’s condo. We made love all afternoon.”

I smiled both in her pleasure and at the erotic pictures that flashed before my mind. I nodded for Allison to continue.

“That afternoon was so wonderful. I’ve never felt so close to a female in my life – as close as I do to you. She told me she felt the same way. We brought each other pleasure. We hated to get out of bed, but we both did and came here to be with you that night. You might not have noticed, but we were both pretty physical with you that night. Kate even kissed you a lot and hugged you a lot during your dance lesson.”

“I remember,” I told her.

In a very quiet voice, she said, “We’ve been together like that four other times since then.” Allison dropped her head and stared at the floor. She sobbed again, “I don’t want to lose you.” She sighed and cried again, “Oh, what have I done?”

I pulled her to me. “Allison, I love you. I’m better than all right with what happened. I just want us to talk about it so we end up on the same page, and we know what the other thinks. You don’t have to decide anything today, but my question for you is ultimately what do you want the future to be like? Who’s in it and what role do they play? In general, where do we go from here?”

Allison looked down at the faded carpeting and nodded. I could see her preparing to answer, but I intervened first. I asked her nicely, “Shouldn’t Kate be here talking with us? She has a major role in whatever the outcome of all this is. Why don’t you call her? Ask her to come over for a bit.”

Allison looked shocked and again studied me for a moment before getting up and pulling her cell phone from her purse. She dialed, and I heard one side of the conversation as she spoke in a measured voice to her friend: “Kate, Joel’s here and things are all right ... He thinks you should be here to talk about the future ... No, he’s not mad. In fact, he’s very loving and compassionate about our relationship ... He told me he wanted me to keep seeing you ... Please come over ... Now’s fine. ... I love you too. Bye.” She looked at me and said quietly, “She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

I stood and held my arms open to Allison, and she flowed into them. We kissed tenderly, and I hugged her tightly. “This will work out just fine,” I assured her. I told her, “You don’t have to act like a child that’s been caught doing something bad. You did what was natural and right for the two of you. Just accept that.”

Inside, I hoped I was right. I relied on Stone's wisdom as I'd heard it. I knew that Allison, Kate, and I were getting into a place where few people went or even thought about. I hoped I was strong enough to cope with what new lives we created for ourselves.

Allison said again in an apologetic tone, "I'm so sorry to have put you through this. I've felt so selfish and stupid for wanting Kate, for being with her, for caring about her the way I do. I didn't want to upset you, particularly after you've been so positive and upbeat about everything in our lives these past months, and since you got your dosages figured out."

I asked out of curiosity, "Have you ever been with another woman?"

"Oh, no!" Allison replied in a shocked tone. "I thought about it a few times years ago, but I never did anything like this before. In that regard, I was a virgin." She looked at me to be sure I saw her honesty.

I asked, "How about Kate?"

"This was her first time too. She's gone out with guys a lot, but just hasn't found anyone she's attracted to – except you. I ... I'll let her tell you."

We heard Kate's car pull up in front of the house. Allison and I went to the door and walked out onto the lawn to greet her.

Kate walked across the grass, slowing as she got near us. She looked pale and unsure of her acceptance. On any other day, she would have been bubbly and self-assured, but she'd put the major relationship and friendship in her life at risk. Allison reached out and took her hand in a reassuring gesture when she got close.

Kate looked at me and said somewhat formally, "I'm sorry for any pain I might have caused you. It wasn't intentional." Her head dropped towards the ground in a supplicating gesture, not at all in character with her personality.

I moved to her side and put my arm around her and hugged her. I said in a supportive tone that surprised her, "Come on in. We've been talking, and I realized that you need to be part of this too, since you're very much involved."

Kate tried to gauge my feelings as we walked into the house. She studied me. I led her to the sofa, getting both women to sit side by side.

"Before we talk, can I get either of you anything to drink?" A moment later I brought two bottles of water from the refrigerator and set them on the coffee table. I pulled the one living room chair we had in closer to the table so I faced the two women. Allison looked anxious

again, and I thought Kate would explode out of her skin. I studied her in the light and could tell she'd been crying too; her eyes were red and puffy.

I posed the first question: "Kate, how do you feel about Allison?" I didn't put any sarcasm into the question, and actually tried to keep my tone neutral and emotion free. I was seeking information, not ammunition for an execution.

Kate looked at Allison and then took her hands in hers. She spoke softly, "I love her." I nodded to encourage her to continue and to maintain the physical contact. "When we met in August as she started work, I thought I'd found the best friend I always searched for. We bonded instantly. I could tell her anything, and I felt so warm about her, and all the things she did. She was so happy, and that made me happy. When you made her happy that made me happy."

Allison strongly nodded to me to indicate she felt the same way. Kate continued, "Each day we shared more and more of ourselves with each other. We were like two adjacent flowers opening up to share our inner most beauty with each other. We talked about everything: our joys, sorrows, hopes, aspirations, and dreams. And then, our joys and dreams started to involve each other. You were there too, but my focus became on Allison."

Kate looked at me with pleading eyes, "About a month ago, I wanted to be with her. I wanted to make love to her the way you were, the way that two people in love share themselves with each other." She looked at Allison for verification and got a loving nod. "I talked to Allison, and she felt the same way. So we made love, and it was so nice." A tear rolled down her cheek. Allison squeezed her hand. "I really just want to be with her all the time, naked and caressing her and having her caress me. I want to crawl inside her love. I know that's selfish, and I don't mean for it to shut you out. I know you bring her happiness too, and that she needs your love as well." She shook her head roughly, to bring herself out of her reverie. "Anyway, that's what happened and how I feel." She barely got the last sentence out before she sobbed into her hands, a few tears visibly leaking through her fingers and running down her arms.

A few second later, she struggled for control, and I just sat and let her reclaim that ground. Finally, Kate looked up at me. I asked her, "Kate, how do you feel about me?"

She studied me for a long time, tears still flowing down her cheeks. Allison gave her hand a couple of slight urgings in my direction, clearly indicating that she should reply. I watched the color rise in Kate's neck; she blushed. "Joel, I'm embarrassed to tell you in front of Allison, but she already knows. I've told her how much I like you – and that's true, but I feel so much more than that." Her gaze averted, and she reached for her water. She looked at Allison with an oblique glance to see whether she'd hurt that relationship. Allison still held her hand and looked adoringly at her friend.

When I was sure she wasn't going to add anything further, I leaned forward and said, "Kate, I feel the same way about you. You know, I'm struggling with what love is ... what commitment means, what it means to be in a relationship, how to express my feelings, how to be affectionate, how to be supportive, ... heck, even how to be a friend. I'll never be completely done sorting out my life after my screwy upbringing, but I will be in control rather than let my past control me."

Kate nodded.

Somehow I thought it appropriate that I hug her, so I got out of my chair and moved around the coffee table to her side. I sat on the small portion of the sofa next to her and pulled her into my arms, giving her a comfortable hug that I hoped communicated that I cared for her and wasn't angry about what she and Allison had done. Again, I thought how I had an alternative course of action that could have been filled with anger, shouting, and damaged egos all around. This way seemed so more reasoned.

When I ended my hug, I posed the same question to Kate that I'd posed to Allison a half-hour earlier: "Kate, I asked Allison a question that I'd like you to consider too. You don't have to give us an answer tonight. I'd prefer it if you thought about it in a more deliberate way than just blurting out something off the top of your head." Kate nodded, and I went on, "What do you want the future to be like? Do you want a long-term relationship with Allison ... with me ... with us? How would it work? Where do you see all this going?"

Kate looked surprised, but visibly accepted the question for study. I saw Allison absorb the more robust version of the question. Kate turned to Allison and said in a low voice, "We probably shouldn't talk about our answers or our ideas with each other until we're together again, right?"

Allison and I both nodded agreeing with her proposition.

I said, "Look tomorrow's Friday. We have classes and work. We'll have a lot on our minds, but hopefully we can get through the day. How about we meet here on Saturday morning to share our thoughts. We'll draw straws to see who goes first and second." The women agreed.

We stood up after our short talk. Kate hugged me tightly and kissed me tenderly. She then hugged and kissed Allison. She still had a worried look on her face; however, she reluctantly left the house. At that point, I don't know what else I could have said to make her feel better. I knew she'd stew about the questions I'd posed to her until we could talk again on Saturday.

In bed that night, Allison couldn't get close enough to me. As usual, we slept in the nude, and all night she had her warm body pressed against me. I often felt her lips kiss my back, shoulder, or neck as she snuggled into me, often with our legs intertwined. I know I felt a

tear or two on her cheeks as well. I reached over in the dark of the early morning and pulled her to me. I again told her I loved her, a remark that just made her squirm into my body more.

I didn't see Kate on Friday; however, Allison told me she saw her at work, but that they didn't talk to each other. Between my classes and studying, I found time to jot down a couple of dozen ideas that I liked as my vision of the future.

More important to understanding the new terrain I was discovering, I had lunch in the Student Union with Stone Goodman. I told him about my discussions with Allison and Kate the night before, and about the questions I'd given all of us as homework. Stone helped me think through a few areas I was trying to articulate, sharing his past experience and relationships with me in a few areas I asked about. I promised I'd keep him updated and thanked him for his time and support.

That afternoon, I kept switching back and forth between studying and doing research on the Internet about different forms of relationship and their success factors. My list of attributes about my future life turned into a couple of pages of small type.

Friday night, Allison was unusually attentive while I studied, often bringing me tea and later even some freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. Amazingly, I got a lot of study work done, and I finished the final paper for one of my independent study credits in world history.

Allison and I slept as we had the night before, with her pressed tightly against me all night. I recalled when we'd started to live together it had taken me several weeks to get used to someone else being in the bed with me. Now, I relished the physical contact of our bodies. I made a mental note to include that in my future vision.

Saturday morning I had to laugh as three obviously left brain people gathered in our living room. How did I know we were all left-brain? We each had in hand carefully prepared lists of things to talk about – our visions for the future. I watched as each of us made last minute additions to our lists.

Allison and Kate both appeared nervous, Kate especially, probably because she thought I saw her as an interloper in my relationship with Allison. I'd hugged both of them to try to set them at ease.

We sat in a circle on the floor in the living room, our coffee cups full and steaming on the table. I took the initiative to start the meeting. I smiled and said, "You both look so glum. This is supposed to be a happy time. We're sharing our wish lists for the future. One way to think about doing this is that the other two of us will try to make your dreams come true." I smiled in turn at Kate and then Allison. They weren't too sure. I reminded them, "Well draw straws. I propose we listen to each of us talk then have a general discussion. The idea

of sharing our thoughts is to be sure we're on the same page about our relationships and where they're going, that we understand each other's boundaries and limits, that we can find a harmonious way to find happiness."

I'd pulled a blade of straw grass from the yard earlier and cut it into three pieces, one significantly shorter than the other two. The women watched as I arranged the three blades of straw in my left hand so that they couldn't tell which was the short one. I turned to the women and said, "Short straw goes first." I help my hand out to Kate, and she drew one of the normal length straws. Allison went next and drew the short straw. I heard her sigh at the prospect of having to go first.

She looked at each of us with eyes as big as saucers, like a small child that was scared of Santa Claus yet ready to tell him her wish list. She took a deep breath and then started. "I love both of you." She choked up almost immediately from her tension, her eyes becoming teary, but she forced herself to continue. "I don't want to lose either of you." She turned to me, "Joel, you know I've fallen deeply in love with you. I don't want you to feel threatened by my feelings for Kate. I find my heart is bigger now than I ever knew possible. Kate is an 'And' to how I feel, not an 'Or.' I don't feel that I have to make a choice, unless you make me. I want both of you in my life."

She turned to Kate, "My darling Kate, I've just discovered you only months after my falling in love with Joel. I feel doubly blessed. I have Joel's love, and I would have never thought I could love a woman the way I feel about you – mentally and physically." She looked at me to see whether I showed any sign of disagreeing with her premise that I still loved her. I nodded my agreement, and she went on, "I surprised myself in such a nice way by all these feelings. Kate, I want you in my life on whatever terms you'll accept. I connect with you on so many levels, just as I do with Joel."

Allison looked between the two of us as she sipped her coffee for a second. She went on, "I can only envision the next couple of years. Joel you'll finish your degree, and Kate, you and I will continue to work together. After that, I want family, and I'd love you both to be in my nuclear family. I eventually want children, and I think it would be so special to have the two of you as part of that."

I watched as Allison twisted a tissue into miniscule pieces, as she was prone to do when she was nervous. The pieces started to gather on her dark slacks and sweater. I smiled and nodded to her to continue. Kate seemed to hang on her every word.

Allison looked up at the two of us and said in a stressed voice, "Can I stop for a while. Those are my big points anyway." She set her page of notes aside.

I nodded and picked up a long and short straw from the coffee table. I shuffled them around in my hand without looking and then held them up to Kate. She drew the short straw.

Kate started slowly and deliberately, “I love you Ally, and Joel I’ve never told you how I really feel, at least not in those words.” She looked over at me and repeated, “Joel, I’m highly attracted to you, and I’m falling in love with you too.” She blushed. I reached beside me to take her hand and hold it. I wanted to show her that I cared for her too, but not interrupt her time to talk. I noticed that Allison didn’t look the least bit surprised.

She went on, “I tried to think about the three of us being together. I needed to get specific for my vision, because it’s what would make me happiest – if it happened this way.” She looked at the two of us. “I’d like us to all live together. I want us to be a family too – now, but closer than me living a couple of miles away in a different place. I mean, I live over here much of our free time anyway, so things wouldn’t change that much. But, I want to be closer to the two of you – physically.” She looked me in the eye and said, “I want to share your bed.” I squeezed Kate’s hand, and then took Allison’s hand in mine as well.

Kate continued, “I see us talking a lot about our relationship too. I know couples that have broken up because they didn’t talk enough. ‘Fine’ is not a good word to describe how you feel in a relationship. We’d need to force ourselves to talk about what’s working well and what we’d like to change. We need to sit down like this, even when it’s awkward, and hash things out. We need a weekly time where we have to bring up what’s on our minds about ‘us.’” She paused and looked between us, “You see I’m committed to this. If we live together, if we go beyond what we’ve been doing, it’s got to work in the long run for me. We can’t just get together and enjoy the sex and a little companionship, and then let it crumble in a year or two because we let some issues or feelings get out of control. We’ve got to keep learning about each other, and how we tick.”

She went on, “I admire the two of you for all sorts of reasons: Joel, for you rebuilding your life over the past year. I know you went from the edge, to where you are now, and that’s a huge turnaround. I’m so proud of you and how well you’re doing in school, and in such a tough subject area. However, most of all, Joel, I just like being around you. You are the nicest guy I’ve ever met. You’re humble, tolerant, and forgiving, eager to learn, curious about everything, willing to change and improve, stable, have a work ethic, you’re so appreciative, polite, and ... I could keep going.” I smiled at her to indicate my appreciation for her kind words.

Kate continued, “And Allison, you are so caring and such a great mentor to Joel and to me. I think you’re more creative than I am, and I constantly watch you to see how you think. I respect the two of you so much, in so many ways. I say this, because respect is so important to me in terms of a relationship. I’ve got to respect the people I live with – the people I love. I’ve never met anyone I felt this way about except the two of you.”

Kate paused and consulted her notes, “Lastly, in my vision of our future, we each remain individuals. I know that we’re supposed to make our happiness from within, and not rely on

others to ‘make us happy.’ That sounds great in theory, but being with you both would make me happy. I’ll be happy within too, but happier with you.” She paused and added, “I thought a lot about all the possible combinations of us being together, and how I felt about that. I will be happiest when you are both happy. I remembered an expression my mother used to say, ‘You’re only as happy as your least happy child.’ I guess I feel that way about you. Your happiness is my happiness.”

“Yesterday, when I studied about living arrangements, I read a lot about polyamory – a group of people that love each other and live together, as in a threesome. Jealousy is the one emotion that destroys such an arrangement. The opposite of that really has no commonly used word. Proponents of that life style created the word ‘Compersion’ to fill that void; it means taking pleasure that one’s partners are finding happiness; even when you’re personally not the reason. The emotion doesn’t have to be sexual. It’s about happiness, and that’s what I want for us.”

After a long pause, Kate and Allison both turned to me. I picked up the short straw and waved it in the air just to emphasize the point that I accepted my turn. I started, “There is nothing either one of you said, that I don’t whole heartedly endorse and agree with. The ‘win-win’ appears for the three of us to live together. That’s easy to say, and hard to grapple with in some ways.”

“My first response when I found the two of you making love was shock at the infidelity; my trust had been violated, and although I worked through that, part of me – my ego – still feels that way. Later, I realized Allison and I had never talked about that subject. I’d made an assumption based on an old model of a relationship that sexual exclusivity was a requirement. Now, if we create a threesome, I believe there should be an explicit agreement, unless we talk about it ahead of time, that we remain faithful to one another. Within that boundary, anything goes, anytime, anywhere – no jealousy, and lots of creativity.” I smiled at the girls, and they both nodded to me to show they agreed with my premise.

I paused and turned to Kate, “My primary partner – my only partner in my life – has been Allison. She has become my rock and anchor, my teacher and mentor, and my confidant, and lover. Kate, I’m willing to extend my arms and love you as well, yet, Allison will still be all these things for me. You should not take that as a signal that I don’t care for you, only that our relationship hasn’t had the same time to grow and mature in the same ways that makes me think that way about you. You and I need to build our own intimacy, not to exclude Allison, but to expand our own relationship within the framework of whatever we put together. Allison and you will be doing the same thing, as will Ally and I.”

I paused and looked at Kate, “Kate, you and I need to date just the way Allison and I did for a while. The result will probably be the same, but you and I need to get to know each other and to do some romantic things together – just the two of us. This isn’t to exclude Allison; it’s to build a base for our part of this relationship.” I looked at Allison, and she smiled and

nodded in agreement. I went on, “We may start our new arrangement today, but we’ll have some homework to do for at least a few months.” Kate nodded in agreement.

I went on, “I come to this emerging relationship with many screwed up ideas and myths about relationships. I don’t feel that I can be anyone’s knight in shining armor or savior. I’m only recently saved myself.” I grinned at Allison. “You both know I struggle with what love is and lots of other things about emotional support, romance, love, sex, and companionship. I have to learn how to both give and receive. I’m more than happy to not be monogamous, that’s a marriage myth that hasn’t worked too well since it was created thousands of years ago. Creating a threesome is appealing, and I think we should try it, otherwise we’ll always wish we had.”

“The idea of a threesome with a man and two women is erotic and highly ego-gratifying to a male, particularly this male. I’m flattered. If we proceed, however, I don’t intend to be a dominant, chest-pounding ape that has to have his way. I’d hope we have a balanced and sharing relationship among equals. We each have our strengths and weaknesses.”

“I say all this because I want us to start on a high degree of realism. Whatever we do will take work – continually. It’s not all going to be peaches and cream. We’re going to be mad at each other, unsatisfied, hurt, jealous, depressed, unhappy, lonely, defensive, pressured, or just feeling awkward. We’re imperfect people, and we won’t make a perfect relationship. So part of my vision for us is that we remain realistic about how we’re going to feel; that we find a new level of tolerance within so that we can be forgiving and compassionate with each other when we’d normally want to be angry and peeved.” I paused and added, “We all love each other, yet think of how you’ve felt inside that love for the past two days. I would guess it hasn’t been comfortable.” Both women nodded emphatically.

I paused to be sure both women wanted me to continue. “Let’s see we’ve talked about family, but we haven’t talked about our friends or extended family.” I turned to Allison and asked, “We’re going to need strength to tell your parents about the three of us.” I turned to Kate and added, “And, I suspect your family too. What we’re about to do is unconventional by their standards, perhaps unacceptable. I’m lucky; I don’t have to worry about parents or relatives since I’m alone on this planet except for the two of you. We have friends too; do you see any issues in telling them? Do we ‘come out?’ Some of our friends around here probably think we already live together, so I think we can be ‘open’ in this geography. You each know your parents and siblings, and will have to make that decision, probably after there’s some stability to our new family unit.”

“I have a year-and-a-half of college to complete. I think that time is a worthy length of time to see whether we can make this work, although for me it’s somewhat artificial since I’m not working full time. During that time, I could see us living here in this house. It’s small, and that would force us to be closer than we would be in a larger house where we could create individual spaces that we could hide in. There’s nowhere to hide here, and that may be good.

Issues will surface faster and we'll have to deal with them more thoroughly to put them to rest."

"For the next two years, maybe more, I want us to continue to use birth control. I don't think we want unplanned pregnancies while we're in the middle of our experiment. I know Allison is on the pill, and I assume you are too?" Kate nodded. "After that, I see us moving to larger and bigger quarters, and starting our families. I think we can talk about it then, but I am awed by the prospect of fathering children with either or both of you. Our economic situation at the time, will probably dictate how fast we move in that area of our lives after I graduate and get a job."

Until we feel comfortable with this arrangement and feel it has some staying power, I propose that we each keep separate bank accounts; but that we contribute equally to the living expenses we share. We'll elect a treasurer each quarter that will pay the common bills and make sure we're solvent. I think we should sit and talk periodically about what we're spending money on, particularly when we decide to spend money on discretionary things, such as a joint vacation or major appliances. Finances are the largest source of disagreement and arguments in a relationship, so we should be especially vigilant in this area.

"So, we've covered family, living together, finances, trust, communications, our happiness, and our love. The only other thing I can think of right now is commitment to each other's growth and development, and I say this as I am coming out of a long period when those things were furthest from my mind. We've got to keep growing and be sure each other do too. We should be each other's mentors." I paused and added, "This is an experiment, and we're the guinea pigs. I'm eager to see how we make it work." I paused and added, "I'm through for now, how about some discussion?"

The discussion went on for four hours, punctuated only by a short break and then my growling stomach as lunch time started to slip past. The three of us went for a walk on campus in the afternoon; our voices animated as we touched on point after point about forming and managing the complex relationship. The place was quiet, an indication that exams were about to start and that the last minute cramming had started. We held hands taking turns being in the middle. We stopped at the campus wishing well and made a joint wish for each other's happiness and joy.

On the way back to the house Allison and I rented, we stopped at Kate's apartment while she packed a couple of suitcases and picked up a box of personal possessions. When we got home we started preparations for an early dinner. There was a tacit understanding by Allison and me that Kate would sleep with us that night, and that she and I would make love. I felt nervous, and I hoped I'd prove to be a worthy lover to her. As dinner was underway, Allison whispered in my ear, "Tonight, please focus on Kate. Make love to her. You two need to connect. This night is about you two."

Less than half an hour later Kate pulled me aside, “Joel, tonight be sure to make love to Allison in any special way you can. She needs the reassurance you bring her. You and I can connect some other time, but she needs you tonight.”

I chuckled inwardly at how my two ‘spouses’ were starting to look out for each other, and how they dealt with the limited resource in our relationship – me! I decided I’d be as creative as I could be and try to please both of them.

I flirted outrageously with both women. I went out of my way to touch or smooth my way past them in the kitchen or as I passed them once we were seated at our dining room table. I gave both of them kisses; especially Kate who I did plan to favor that night considering it was our first time together. I whispered loving and erotic words in their ears; I nibbled on an earlobe or tongued inside the ear; I kissed the nape of each woman’s neck – lifting their hair and using my tongue to caress that erogenous zone just where the hairline ends. Of course, I plied all of us with our best bottle of wine, although at the time I think it might have cost \$9.98 a bottle. Gradually we all relaxed and got into the mood. The tensions of talking about our futures and building the relationship were now past.

Clean up from dinner finished in record time with the three of us. Then there was that awkward moment; the three of us standing in the kitchen, when we looked at each other knowing now was the time. I hugged and kissed Allison, and then turned and repeated my advances on Kate. I swept Kate up into my arms, and she put her arms around my neck as I carried her down the short hallway to our bedroom, Allison close behind turning out the lights.

Allison lit the two candles we often used when we made love. I got a lovely smile from her as I set Kate down. I whispered to the two women, “I love you.” Inside, I realized I felt no hesitation or reservation at the words; I did love the two of them.

We were creative in our first lovemaking as a threesome. I worried about pleasing my two partners, until they each confessed the same concern. We laughed and agreed to be more relaxed with one another. After that the pleasures started to arrive in ways I’d never imagined. Hours later, the three of us lay awake but exhausted. We were ecstatic about our time together. I nestled the two women beside me in the center of our large bed.

I thought, now we are a threesome in every way I can imagine. I realized I could let my ego soar and take masculine delight in the event. Instead, I chose to be the romantic, the eroticist, the poet, the philosopher, and the mystic, seeing the creation of a new loving entity between the three of us that could sustain and nurture each of us for the indefinite future.

We eventually slept. I marveled at how content and loved I felt. Allison shared a similar thought with me as she drifted off into dreamland. Kate gave a final purr of contentment and

gently kissed me. As I drifted asleep, I thought how far I'd come from when I stood so alone in the middle of McCormick Bridge.

COMPLICATIONS

Allison, ably abetted by Kate, kept me aimed squarely at graduating from the University in early June a little less than two years after I started. This meant I had to take course overloads every semester, as well as full a course load in the intervening summer and in the interim semesters. I also arranged for special credit courses whenever I could. My goal was to amass the required number of credits the school required for graduation, including the 'life experience' credits the school had granted me upon admission. There was seldom a time when I didn't have my head in a book or wasn't frantically writing a term paper. Of course, even with my scholastic endeavors, I had to earn some money at my part-time job at Health-Tronics.

Both women became my mentors, often helping me by editing a term paper or helping me cram for an examination. As each day passed, the professional confidence I had in myself rose. Despite my heavy schedule, my first semester's grades put me on the Dean's List, a point that amazed even some of my professors that knew the background I came from.

In terms of my relationships, I often expressed my doubts to Allison or Kate that I was being attentive enough to them. They promised me I'd be able to make it up to them once I graduated. One of the benefits of our threesome was that neither of them felt neglected since they had the other as both friend and lover. At the time, it seemed like an ideal arrangement. When I wasn't around, the two of them nestled into a comfortable Sapphic relationship a few months after I had discovered them in bed together. Some of their new relationship energy wore off, but that didn't diminish the deep feelings they had for each other.

The rest of the time, my own sex life was beyond imagination. I played counterpoint to the women and loved them both dearly. Both women told me they loved me frequently, and usually felt they had to prove the fact with some erotic or wanton act. Often, the two would try to outdo each other, provoking me to leave my studies for an hour to play with one or both of them. Near their bedtime, it was not unusual to have a naked nymph or two working to seduce me. I could never say no.

Kate moved in completely after New Year's, and our period of adjustment to one another began. Our first major argument arrived within our first week together. Kate was relaxed about putting things away, including her clothing, dishes, and anything else. Allison was a 'neat-nik,' preferring an exceptionally tidy house with everything put away almost immediately after someone was finished with it. I fell in the middle, but had been leaning towards Allison's end of the scale after the few months we'd lived together.

One Saturday morning, we sat with coffee and talked about what was working and what needed changing in our threesome. Allison raised the 'tidiness issue.' Kate felt defensive. I felt put upon that I had to be the tiebreaker. This was not how I'd envisioned our Saturday

talks about getting along. Kate cried, and thought we'd so quickly fallen out of love with her because of her casual life style. Allison got angry because everything was left for her to pick up. I wondered if there weren't a middle ground; I even offered up half my den as a place Kate could do as she pleased, including leaving a colossal mess. In the end, we agreed that we'd see whether things changed now that the issue had been surfaced between us; no one wanted to commit to anything.

Kate raised the issue of what we intended to do about telling our families we were living together. I had no family and opted out of the discussion. I would cooperate with whatever they decided. Ducking immediate problems with their families, Allison and Kate chose to veil the true nature of our relationship as far as family members were concerned. The girls figured they'd use a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' approach to things.

Allison's family knew I was already her serious live-in boyfriend. They preferred that we not live together, but reluctantly capitulated to the more modern trend and tried to ignore our living arrangements. Allison's prior relationship with Adam, and her sister's relationship had paved the way for that position. Allison mentioned to her mother that we might rent a room to help with our finances, volunteering that she intended to ask one of her best friends about renting. After that nothing further was said.

Kate told her parents that she'd rented a room from a couple with a larger-than-needed house near the UNC campus and where she worked. She didn't go into a lot of detail nor was any sought. To the rest of the world, Kate, Allison, and I were good friends and housemates. No one seemed to question the arrangement, perhaps because it was out of the mainstream. Only a few close friends, such as Stone Goodman and his girlfriend, knew we were lovers.

To preserve the guise, on holidays Allison and I would make the journey up to the Washington, D.C. area to visit her parents for a day or so. I had become more tolerable to her parents over time, since it became obvious that I would not go away. They were pleased that I maintained my motivation towards my degree and as the months passed that I'd started to think about lucrative and challenging job positions where I could advance quickly.

Kate often took the holiday times to visit her own parents and her brother's family in Ohio. She often related how her parents were starting to pressure her to develop a serious relationship and get married. She fended them off citing an active social life that had yet to produce 'Mr. Right.'

Stone Goodman, my English professor for two semesters, became a close friend and confidant, and in some ways the father I never had. He liked me, mentored my academic career, and I know he took personal interest in the success of the threesome I'd forged with Allison and Kate, partly because it brought him fond memories of an earlier time in his life when he'd lived in a similar arrangement. Over time, he continued to share some advice on how to keep the relationship stable and successful.

We often had Stone, and his girlfriend Gale to our house, usually for a cookout, and they reciprocated even more frequently. Gale was a decade younger than the sexagenarian, but shapely and extremely intelligent. She taught Spanish at the University, and incessantly teased Stone about her fiery Latin disposition. In jest, he'd often retort in front of her, telling me I'd chosen wisely by picking two women with more sanguine dispositions. Those comments always unleashed a volley of heated comments from all concerned, much to his delight.

Stone told me one day that because of our threesome and how Gale responded to it, he had finally felt comfortable enough telling her about that part of his prior life, including her resemblance to one of the women in his threesome of decades earlier. He admitted being tense about telling her, and then relieved that she took his history in stride and even made something erotic out of it by way of her teasing and dirty talk when they made love. He said he wondered why he'd waited so long.

One time, he helped us through a rocky period when we were hung up on how we made decisions as a group. As expected, we'd hit some snags about which house expenses to share as common and which were individual, and how to spend some money for additional furniture and appliances. While the disagreements arose between all of us, Kate arbitrarily seemed to side with Allison without substantive contribution to the resolution of our tiffs.

Over some wine on our back deck one Saturday evening, Stone shared how his threesome years earlier had dealt with the identical issue. He also told us about a family systems theory by a research psychiatrist named Murray Bowen. Bowen had observed that triangles are frequently formed to ease the anxiety when an argument erupts between two people; one of them seeking a third party to sympathize and side with them. The other will also create a triangle with another person, or perhaps throw himself or herself into work or some hobby. The tension is reduced, but the causal argument doesn't get resolved. Stone's advice was to not let the triangles develop in our complex relationship, and to be sure we addressed the underlying issues head-on. Armed with that insight, the next day we resolved about half a dozen issues we'd been dancing around as a threesome, and things got much better again.

Allison figured out that if all went well, I would have spent eighty-four weeks at the University and then be done my undergraduate degree. She made a big calendar for the three of us to use to keep tabs on our appointments; however, the most notable thing about it was an attached handmade pad of large numbers counting down the weeks until I graduated. We'd have a small celebration each Friday night and tear off one of my numbers to indicate the week had passed.

At first, I thought the number of weeks left to complete my goal went by so slowly, then as final exams for my first semester neared, and Allison, Kate, and I redefined our relationship, everything seemed to go a warp speed. There was never enough time for me to do all the

things I needed or wanted to do. I did two independent study courses over the winter break, taking time to go up to Allison's parent's home for Christmas.

A year later, Allison, Kate, and I sat in our kitchen just after New Year's Day, and I marveled that my countdown calendar now only showed eighteen weeks before graduation. Once again, at the end of the holidays, I had two exams from my interim courses, one in differential equations, and another in laser technology.

One thing I had to do during my last semester at UNC was start to look for a regular job. I let my boss at Health-Tronics know that I would need full-time employment in late May, and that I would be job-hunting. He told me the company expected to make me an offer for employment, and that he would start thinking about what kind of positions they could tempt me with. He urged me not to take any action without talking to them.

I signed up with the university's placement office for the interview programs, carefully noting when various companies were coming to campus to interview graduating seniors. One guidance counselor told me she thought I had an edge over the younger students because of my maturity and dedication to my advancement.

When I mentioned my job hunt over dinner that night, you would have thought I'd purposely created the world's largest calamity. Both women burst into tears, crying on my shoulder and then on each other's about breaking up the threesome. The teary discussion rapidly degenerated to my callous behavior over not consulting them, or even talking about my plans with them. I was a male chauvinist, ignoring their opinions or counsel. I'd taken them for granted. I was presumptive about them following me if I took a job far away. The accusations and tumult went on and on, despite my protestations.

Three very unhappy people went to bed that night, but I don't think any of us slept much. The next morning, I declared an emergency family meeting. I cut class, and both women phoned in late to work. At least things were calmer. I felt terribly misunderstood, and voiced to them how tentative my job search was at that point, how I actually hadn't identified any companies to interview, and how the only serious job talk I'd had was with my current boss at Health-Tronics, about a mile from where Allison and Kate worked.

Kate and Allison both expressed regret at their over-reaction, but that they were unusually sensitive about keeping our relationship in tact past my graduation. They'd talked between the two of them a few days earlier, hoping that my completion of the degree and need for a new job wouldn't be the end of things, as we'd come to like them. My mention of my job hunt had triggered their emotional response.

We talked about whether I should interview out of the area, and whether they'd be interested in relocating if I moved. We used Silicon Valley as an example of one place I could move,

since there were many jobs in the technology field out there, and both women knew the area due to visits with friends in the Bay area.

By nine o'clock in the morning, we all felt better, and I'd readily agreed to some simple criteria I'd use to pick the companies I'd interview with. Despite the early hour, the three of us celebrated the resolution of our tension with an hour of 'makeup sex.' Whatever anger or frustration was felt by any of us was soon replaced by the passionate lovemaking the three of us indulged in. We were each more than willing to put things behind us, experiencing peaks higher than we usually reached.

It took me over a week to catch up with the classes I missed that morning; however, I learned, more thoroughly this time, how I had to involve my companions more intimately in my thinking about situations that might affect them.

Allison had continued to work on her master's degree, taking advantage of her employer's tuition reimbursement plan. After her first semester, she'd doubled up, taking two courses each semester and two over the summer semester. Many of her courses included some lab work so carried a higher number of credits. Much to her delight she could look forward to graduating at the same time I did.

With two serious students in the house, Kate could have become unglued and drifted away from us. Instead, however, she became so helpful and supportive of our efforts. She took on more than her share of housework, even doing daily sweeps of the house for out of place belongings. I marveled at how she'd changed from the time of our first argument about her tidiness. She also helped Allison with her chemistry and biochem courses; often pointing out pitfalls she'd learned when she'd taken similar courses at Ohio State. She smoothed the way for us to move rapidly through our programs.

The spring semester whirled by, and then, before we knew it, we had only week to graduation. We all celebrated by tearing off the large number two from my special calendar. I'd soon complete my undergraduate degree, and Allison would finish her Master's degree. I couldn't believe it. I even went by the University's Registrar's Office a few weeks earlier to be sure there was no problem with my graduation. There weren't. The following Sunday, I'd walk across the stage in a procession of engineering and science students and receive my Bachelor of Science, and Allison would join a much smaller and more select group of students to receive her Master of Science degree.

Just to think about it brought tears to my eyes. I reflected back on how lost I'd been a little over two years before, so lost and so dejected that I'd wanted to end my life. Both Allison and Kate often 'took my temperature' to be sure I wasn't slipping back into the same kind of doldrums that had nearly ended my life. Fortunately, due to the drugs I'd been taking and the sessions I'd had with Dr. Coral Moore, I hadn't had any feelings of desolation. Sure, I'd

been disappointed here and there about a test or grade I'd received, but I managed to take it all in stride.

Moreover, I'd accepted a new position with Health-Tronics, my part-time employer. Starting a couple of weeks after graduation I'd more than double my annualized rate of pay and become a full-fledged computer engineer for them, working on the software that drove their various patient monitoring systems. The other benefits that I'd get were beyond competitive compared to the other companies I'd interviewed.

Graduation was scheduled from nine-thirty to eleven o'clock on the first Sunday morning in May at Keenan Stadium. The weather was ideal. I dressed in my only suit, complete with starched white shirt and a new tie the girls had given me. I looked ready to take on the world, and, further, I felt as though I could.

Allison and Kate both dressed up in summer frocks, one a light blue and the other white to represent the school colors. Allison and I had to leave early to line up with the others in our graduating classes so we left the house about eight o'clock. Kate came too, with camera in hand, so she could get a good seat and record the event. As was typical, we left the house in flurry, not bothering to make the bed or do the breakfast dishes. As well, we never locked the house.

We'd planned an afternoon celebration party to start at one o'clock and invited everyone we knew, and even a lot of people we didn't know. Our friends all volunteered to bring various food dishes, beer, or wine, so all we'd have to do was straighten the house before people started to arrive; an easy task if we could get home by twelve-thirty.

The ceremony was right out of a Hollywood movie. Hundreds of us paraded into our special seats to a very long rendition of Sir Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*. Welcome speeches were made, several honorary degrees were given, and a commencement address made that challenged the new graduates to do great things in the world and not shy away from the monumental challenges facing society. Finally, we all got to stand and parade across the stage as our names were called. We each received our empty diploma holder, as well as several handshakes. I noted I was almost the oldest person in the class. I heard Allison and Kate scream their glee as I walked across the stage, and I repeated the process when Allison's name was called and she accepted her diploma.

I met Allison and Kate and many friends and classmates after the recessional, and we took a hundred photographs. We then retrieved our car and headed home amid laughter and glee at our accomplishments. We both lauded Kate for her efforts, assuring her we would reward her handsomely for all her efforts to help us graduate.

Much to my surprise there was a car with Virginia license plates parked in front of the house. I thought someone had come early to the party.

Allison, however, said, “Uh oh! That’s my parent’s car. What are they doing here?”

The three of us got out of the car and walked up to the house with increasing anxiety. Allison turned ashen as we walked towards the door. As we opened the door, Allison’s parents arose from the sofa and stood opposite us. I expected their congratulations, certainly to their daughter; however, instead I got a puzzled look from the two of them.

Allison’s mother said firmly, “We came down to surprise you and Joel for your graduation. I think we’re the ones that are surprised.” She took a long pause and said, “Are the three of you living together – sleeping together?”

Dad stepped forward as his wife spoke, making sure the three of us knew the two of them were a united front in asking that question and awaiting the answer.

I blundered a short question trying to buy us all time to think: “What makes you think that?”

Mom answered, “Well, we know Kate is supposed to be your housemate. She answers the phone more than the two of you do when we call. So we arrived, and I guess we just missed you before you left for the ceremony this morning. We took a look around and noticed a few things: there were three sets of breakfast dishes; your one bathroom shows the presence of a man and two women; but the greatest revelation is there’s only one bed in this entire house – with three pillows on it. You three sleep together.”

By now Allison had regained some of her color; in fact, she blushed at the last statement. She turned to Kate and me and said, “If you two want to go outside, I’ll explain what’s been going on to my parents.” The offer seemed sincere; however, both Kate and I thought we’d be abandoning Allison to an awkward situation. At the risk it would be more awkward if we stayed, we both shook our heads to indicate we’d stay and be with her. We got a wan smile from her, and we moved on either side of her.

Allison turned to her parents and said, “The three of us have lived together for a year and a half. We are a loving threesome.” She paused and then asked in a voice that seemed forced but cheery, “So, did you go to the graduation, or did you stay here and fret about the discovery of how happy we are living together?”

Arnold and Martha seemed shocked at Allison’s admission, but perhaps more so by their daughter’s dismissive nature to it being anything out of the ordinary. Allison’s father ignored her question and remarks. He looked at me with squinted eyes.

He turned back to Allison and said, “We are not pleased by your living arrangements, and I don’t care how happy they may make you. We raised you to be a good girl, someone we’re proud of, a loving wife eventually, and someone that adheres to the tenets of the Bible. If you

were younger, I'd grab you by the scruff of your neck and drag you home and paddle some commonsense into you." He stammered around for a minute.

Allison's mother picked up the thread by giving me the evil eye, "I suppose you are taking advantage of these two women. I think living like this is a sin and detestable."

Dad jumped in and said, "And, we think it should stop immediately." He clenched his fists in anger. Both of her parents were angry and in shock. He spoke again, practically yelling at Allison in anger, "Are you just trying to make some kind of statement to society by living in this arrangement, proving that the three of you are all so liberal and free-thinking? Is this just a temporary thing?"

I spoke in a low-key, calm voice, "I love both women very much, and they love each other. This is not a temporary thing, and hasn't been since it started. We are committed to each other and expect to remain in this relationship for a very long time."

Allison's mother looked from me to her daughter and spoke with a bitterness in her voice, "We thought you and Joel would get married, and that we'd have grandchildren sometime after you two graduated. We thought things would move in the right direction. But this, this is all wrong ... in so many ways."

Kate spoke before Allison could form her thoughts, "It's only wrong if you choose to define it as wrong. There is nothing 'bad' about this relationship unless you want to apply that label to it. We have thought long and hard about this relationship, and we've worked hard to make it a success. I love Allison very much. I also love Joel. They each love me. We didn't form this relationship for shock value or to prove something to someone else. We live together because we chose to – because it brings us all happiness."

"I don't even know you anymore," Her father said to Allison in an angry voice. "Living this way, you're certainly not the daughter I raised. You're ... you're ... you're no better than a common prostitute." He thought for a second and added, "No, you're worse than a prostitute. A prostitute at least earns some money for her sin. You have nothing to show for this ... this way of life."

Her father turned to me, his voice dripping with sarcasm, and said, "And you, you moron, what are you, the cuckold in the house? You let these women be with each other in a carnal way. Are you queer too? You're certainly not a normal man, and certainly not anyone I want to be related to."

Allison was speechless. Tears came to her eyes. I took her hand in mine. She squeezed me tightly. I saw Kate take her other hand. She looked at her parents and said, "You are both terrible. We didn't invite this. You have no right ..."

Allison's mother interrupted in a confrontational tone, dripping with disgust, "You're a lesbian ... a bisexual?" She looked for confirmation of her worst fears.

Allison turned suddenly and sobbed into my chest holding onto the lapels of my suit. Kate put her hand on Allison's back.

Just then, the front door burst open, and Stone and Gale joyfully walked in singing: "Congratulations to you, congratulations to you, congratulations dear Joel and Allison, ..." The words of the song died out slowly as the two realized they'd walked in on a 'family moment.' Stone carried two cases of beer, and Gale carried a huge bowl of potato salad covered by a cheese board with a gigantic wedge of cheddar cheese on it. She had boxes of crackers under each arm. The two froze in place a dozen feet inside the room. We all looked at them except Allison whose sobs filled the silence.

"Errr, what's going on?" Stone asked. "I thought this would be a very happy occasion."

Allison's Dad spoke, "We just found out our daughter is a lesbian slut." He gestured to Allison. "She's living with these other two ... people ... as a whore, and ... and ... with this shit of a man and that odious woman. And, who the hell are you?"

"Whoa!" Stone said, setting the beer down on the coffee table and puffing up his six-foot two-inch gray-haired physique. "These people, whose home you are in standing in, are my dearest friends, and I don't like your attitude, your words, or your tone of voice. I am Doctor Stone Schorr Goodman, and this is my sweetheart, Doctor Gala Agnese Palmira Castañada. I believe I heard you mis-speak, because the labels you have used could only come from someone unbelievably narrow-minded and bigoted given the society we live in today. Would you care to come out back and allow me to defend the honor of my friends? I believe you are at least ten years younger and twenty pounds heavier, so that should give you some sort of advantage over me." Stone actually began to roll up the sleeves on his dress shirt. He gestured towards the back door.

"Fuck you, no," Allison's father told him bluntly. He turned to his wife, "Come, Martha. Let's leave these assholes to their own transgressions. I no longer have any relatives that live in this state. Let's go home."

Martha, Allison's mother suddenly looked confused. Although she was angry, she seemed to want some kind of resolution before they left, and the way her husband had turned things, there would be no closure that afternoon. She looked from Allison, who hid her face against my chest, to me, and then to Kate.

Kate spoke to Allison's father in an authoritative voice, "If you can change from a loving parent, to someone so spiteful and hateful in such a short time, I doubt you were ever the loving parent you pretended to be. You obviously don't understand what parental love is

about at all. You carry unrealistic expectations that Allison will grow up to be a carbon-copy of you; well here's the news at noon, she's her own person, and living a different era with different values and different expectations from life. You break her heart by not accepting her as she is, plus you shut yourself off from the joy that she could bring you the rest of your life. I agree with Dr. Goodman, you should leave now and not come back until you come back with full acceptance not only for Allison and how she's chosen to live her life, but also for all of us and our life style. LEAVE NOW ... PLEASE." She emphatically gestured to the front door as she nearly screamed the last words.

Allison's father huffed and pulled his wife to and through the open front door. He stormed across the lawn, getting into his car, and slamming the door. Martha was close behind. Seconds later, in a hail of gravel and dust, their car sped away.

Stone turned to all of us from the front window where he'd watched their departure and asked in a humorous tone, "I take it that went well?" I couldn't help but laugh, although my true love was crying against my chest. Stone's comment was such a comic relief to the short but vitriolic tongue-lashing from Allison's parents.

Allison pulled away from me and turned so she could face all of us: In a tear voice she said, "Thank you all so much for your support. You don't know how much that means to me." She then sobbed again, and I pulled her into my chest wrapping her in my arms.

I turned to Stone and Gale, "Could you two be a welcoming committee to our party for a bit. I'm going to take Ally outside and see whether we can soothe things a little." He nodded, and I gestured to Kate. The two of us slowly walked Allison out the back door. Kate grabbed three folding chairs, and we went off to the far corner of our lot under a large shade tree. Kate set up the chairs, and the three of us sat down close enough so that we could touch each other and hold hands.

Allison had started to pull herself together. She said to us in a jerky voice, "I knew they might react this way. I didn't think it would be so severe, or so personally hurtful. I'm so sorry for the comments you both got from them. I didn't know they were coming." We both shook off her remarks.

The three of us sat on the edge of our chairs with our heads together. We held hands and were silent, allowing some sanity to return to each of us after the tirade.

After a few minutes I said, "Allison, I love you." I turned to Kate and repeated my feelings. I went on, "We are stronger because there are three of us. It's more complicated, and it's harder to live this way sometimes, but we are who we are, and we are stronger because of it. This is one of those hard times, and it's going to be better for you Ally because you have Kate and me so close to you." I squeezed the hands of both women, and they reciprocated.

Allison said just above a whisper, “Thank you both so much. I feel stronger already.”

I ventured, “Your parents want you to choose between their way of life and ours. I won’t pretend to make that decision for you, but that’s a terrible position for them to have left you in. You have to reject them and love us, or the other way around. They didn’t leave a middle ground – no gray zone as Stone would say. You are your own person and need to make your own decisions. Don’t let them intimidate you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

Kate spoke, “When we started this triad I never realized it would be so good. If you have to opt out, we’ll understand, but I’m on record as saying that I want things to stay about the same.”

Allison sniffed and said, “Oh, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll miss my parents in a way. They’ve always been hard to take, certainly since I got to be twelve or fourteen, but I always felt a sense of filial devotion to them. I guess that’s gone now. I’m a free agent, and I choose you guys.” She leaned forward and kissed me and then kissed Kate.

Stone came out of the house and walked out to our group: “Joel, I think it’d be great if you could break away – if you can?” He looked at Allison and Kate; they both nodded approval for his request. He said, “Let me stay and talk to Allison. I have some things to tell her that might make her feel at least a little better about what happened.”

Kate and I went back to the house. A few people had already arrived. We both pitched in and did some emergency straightening and cleaning up of the things we’d postponed when we’d left that morning. The deeper we got into the activity for the party, and then our greeting of guests, the further behind us the short episode with Allison’s parents became. I felt sorry for Allison, but resolved I’d help her work through this.

By two o’clock, we had about fifty people crowded into the house and overflowing into the sunny backyard. Someone’s iPod got hooked up to an outdoor stereo and music lightened the mood for everyone there. Stone and Allison had rejoined the party. He gave me a wink to indicate that things were all right; Allison came and gave me a hug. She whispered in my ear, “I’m over it for now. Stone is such a good friend. I’ll tell you about our conversation later.” She actually smiled at me, and then repeated the gesture with Kate.

As double graduation parties go, ours was probably pretty sedate. A few other new grads showed up as well. Allison eventually got in the swing of things, aided by a slight over-indulgence in margaritas that one of co-workers at Health-Tronics had decided were his forte that afternoon. Stone and I fired up the grill, and aided by half a dozen other eager male hands, we soon had a steady stream of burgers, hot dogs, chicken patties, and sausages flowing into hungry mouths. Some big tables overflowed with a cornucopia of other foods and salads.

More people arrived late in the afternoon. I hadn't realized the three of us collective knew so many people. Some dancing started in a corner of the deck; Kate got me to showing my relatively new skills much to everyone's amazement. Allison came and joined us, until the three of us were rocking together. Kate and I both went out of our way to touch Allison; usually in some affectionate gesture and to let her know we shared her pain. Everyone's laughter and sense of celebrations seemed so real and so genuine, even Allison's once she got in the mood.

Our guests started to fade away in waves. The first group departed about dusk, and the second about nine-thirty. Suddenly, about ten o'clock there seemed to be an unplanned but spontaneous effort to cleanup the detritus of the party and return our small house to some state of normalcy. I can't actually recall anyone saying things were 'over,' they just were. By ten-thirty, the last of our guests left.

Kate ventured in a cheery tone, "That went well, considering the rocky start we had at the noon hour." She looked at Allison.

Allison just shook her head. "It seems like so long ago, and such a bad dream. You were all so loving to me all day – Stone and Gale too. It all helped me change my attitude and have a good time."

I asked, "What'd Stone tell you; anything you want to share?"

Allison spoke in a matter of fact tone, "Oh, he reminded me that I have to grow up in my own skin – not a mold that my parents set out for me. If that means having an unconventional relationship, so be it. I'm the one that has to be happy with my life, not my mother or father. He was very supportive." Allison paused and looked at Kate: "He did say that you should take the initiative and tell your parents rather than let another 'surprise' occur."

Kate said, "After today, I've been thinking the same thing. I think part of why your parents reacted the way they did was that they were caught totally unawares. They pieced all the clues we left them together without you telling them ahead of time – or paving the path for acceptance, if that was ever possible, and then we just laid it all out for them."

Allison shook her head: "I knew the three of us would never be acceptable to them. They're too set in one paradigm, and we adopted another. How will your parents take it?"

Kate said, "I honestly don't know. I'll have to think of the words to pave the way. Although they're from the mid-west, I think they'll take it better. I might talk to my brother first and get his ideas. While he's stodgy, he'll at least accept I have a different life style than his."

I recommended, “I wouldn’t do it over the phone. Make a face-to-face visit. We’ll even come with you if you think that would help.”

Kate thought and nodded slowly. She said, “I’ll let you know.”

Allison chugged down the last of her glass of wine and said, “I’m going to bed. I’m physically and mentally exhausted from today. I know things will look better tomorrow and the day after. You guys stay up and enjoy yourselves.” She smiled at each of us, and gave me a wink over her shoulder as she disappeared towards the bedroom.

I looked at Kate. She got up from her chair and came over and cuddled in beside me on the sofa, running her fingers up my thigh in a highly suggestive gesture. She said with a shy grin as she leaned in to kiss me, “I’m willing, if you are?” I’ve never not been willing.

CONSOLIDATION

Kate decided she wanted the three of us to pay a weekend visit to her parents and brother. She told me, “If they can meet you and Allison, it’ll soften the mystery of why I’m living with you – of why I love you both.”

To soften the ground, she told her brother and parents that she was coming up for an overdue visit the following weekend, spending Friday evening with her brother Rob’s family and the rest of the weekend with her parents. A family dinner and Sunday cookout were planned, and we’d leave on Monday. Rob offered up a bed in his home, but Kate explained that she would be with her ‘housemates’ and that we’d all stay ‘together’ in a nearby motel for the visit. “It’ll make things less disruptive for your family, and for mom and dad,” She’d told him, without going into detail about why we were coming on the trip too.

We drove up to Westerville, Ohio, the following Friday, making the four-hundred-fifty-mile trip in a little over eight hours, including a lunch stop. We took turns driving.

Despite her jovial nature, Kate was nervous. Allison and I told Kate how much we loved her and wanted her in our lives for a good part of the journey. To tell the truth, I’d run out of superlative adjectives to extol her virtues and the wonders of her life that she shared with us. Allison had too. Kate loved every minute of it.

We also had one of our better triad meetings where we talked about the health of our relationship and the kind of feelings running through our heads. Since I was in the greatest transition – from student to workingman, I had the most to emote. I even allowed some of my old insecurities to surface when it came to how our relationship would survive the change, particularly as we all got so involved in our careers. My partners made all those feelings evaporate and got me back on an even keel before I’d strayed too far into my dark side.

Rob, his wife Melissa, and their three children shared a small colonial in a development just off Route 3, a few blocks from Otterbein College. He greeted us in the front yard wearing khaki slacks, sneakers, and a plain white t-shirt with no design on it. He’d just finished mowing his small yard.

As Rob greeted his sister with a hug and shook our hands by way of introduction, Melissa and three kids aged three to six burst out of the front door. The children surrounded Aunt Kate, as Melissa got in welcome hugs as well. Melissa was a pudgy housewife who seemed to bask in the joys of motherhood. She was clearly the central focus of her children: the approver and disapprover of their activities, and the referee for their frequent disputes.

The pair led us all into the house and out to the back deck for beer and wine. The back yard was a sea of plastic toys for the children, temporarily piled near the detached garage by Rob when he mowed the lawn. The children were quick to reverse his work and spread the toys from one end of the yard to the other.

The pre-dinner conversation covered our trip up to Ohio, and then gradually more and more about what Allison and I did by way of work and our recent graduations. I watched Kate carefully as the five of us sat in a circle, the children off in a large sandbox.

At one point, Kristen, Rob and Melissa's three-year old, came and stood in front of me, carefully examining me. I smiled at her. She held her arms out to me and said through the pacifier stuck in her mouth, "Up!" so I pulled her onto my lap. She turned so she could watch all the adults. Both Allison and Kate gave me approving smiles. I guess I'd been accepted by at least one child as an 'Uncle.'

After a lull in the conversation, Kate took a deep breath and, without preamble, blurted out, "The three of us live together." She looked to her brother for a reaction.

Rob nodded and said, "We know."

"No," Kate said, "I don't think you understand. I mean we *really* live together."

Melissa immediately got the not-so-hidden message this time, as her husband studied his sister with a puzzled expression. Kate reached over and held my hand. I was already holding hands with Allison.

Rob looked between us and stuttered, "I'm not sure ... you mean ... but your housemates ... are you ..."

Melissa jumped in with a touch of enthusiasm in her voice, "You mean you're more than just living together. You're married only you're not."

Kate said boldly, "Yes. We've been living together for about eighteen months. We love each other very much. Moreover, I need your help."

Rob's mouth was hanging open with a slack-jawed expression on his face. He was still sputtering and trying to get his head around the implications of what his sister had just told him. I nodded my support to him, mentally inviting his questions.

Melissa had grown a smile from ear to ear; her acceptance and approval was palpable. She said eagerly, "I think that's so sweet and romantic. How can we help you?"

Kate said, “It’s time I told Mom and Dad about ‘us.’ You see them all the time. I just need to know how to tell them so they don’t become unglued and fly around the room. About two weeks ago, Allison’s parents found out when they surprised us with a visit at graduation. They were not only shocked; they went into orbit and might never forgive her. Her father called her all sorts of names and disowned her.”

Allison nodded and said in low tone, “We don’t want Kate to have to go through that; that’s why we’re here.”

Rob’s brain finally got into gear. He asked Kate, “Are you asking for their approval – our approval? I’m not sure I want my little sister ...”

Kate interrupted, “No, not approval; that might be too big a jump after how Allison’s parents took it – or didn’t take it. I am asking for acceptance without resentment or anger. I’ve adopted an unconventional life style, and I’ve found love, albeit in an unusual way compared to what you and Melissa have. I’m happy. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

Melissa jumped in, her voice tinged with excitement: “I think what you’re doing is so cool. You’re all so nice. I not only accept, I approve.” She had a smile from ear to ear. “In fact, the more I think about it, I’m sort of envious.” She looked at her husband in a peculiar way.

Rob ignored Melissa’s sideways glance. He said to no one in particular, “Well, our minister would probably have something else to say.”

Melissa dressed her husband down, “Oh, Rob, for God’s sake. The whole Bible is about love. Our minister wouldn’t know shit about love, tolerance, or any other things Jesus tried to teach people. All that’s important is that these people love each other. It’s written all over their faces. Look at them. Make up your own mind; don’t invoke someone else’s opinion as your own.”

Rob seemed to accept that as the final word on the religious viewpoint about the threesome. His gaze shifted to the three of us sitting side-by-side facing the two of them. I held Allison and Kate’s hands, and Allison and I had been unusually attentive to Kate since we arrived, still bolstering her revelation to her family.

Rob said slowly, “Well, I can certainly accept your situation.” He paused and thought for a moment. Kate seemed to hang on what he’d say next. Rob turned to Melissa and continued, “I love you and I love the kids. I guess I sort of live with you, another guy, and two other women anyway.” He laughed at how he’d included the children. “I not only accept, I approve.” He grinned at his sister.

Kate whispered, “Thank you. Thank you so much. You’ll never know how important your opinion is to me.” I could sense relief from some of the anxiety she’d held inside. After a moment, she asked, “And what about Mom and Dad?”

Rob’s eyebrows slowly rose. He said slowly, “Well, that’ll be an interesting conversation tomorrow. Let me think about that for a minute.”

Kate looked from Rob to Melissa, “Will the two of you come and support me – support us, when we tell them? The fact that you don’t mind might help keep things from spiraling out of control.” She suddenly looked anxious again.

Melissa again spoke, “Oh, yes. We’d love to help, but you need to tell us how you three got to where you are. I mean, how do three people fall in love, particularly in a world where all the messages are about being a couple.”

Rob and Melissa listened with rapt attention as Kate, augmented by Allison and me, told about how we’d fallen in love with each other. Allison told how the two of us had met, omitting my depression and near suicide. As she talked, I felt a pang from how I’d felt about over two years earlier; I now barely recognized the person in that veiled description, yet one fear I harbored was that those emotions would come back some day, and that I’d be unable to deal with them. I guess when you’ve been that at the bottom and recovered; you’re always scared that you might go back. Both women had assured me I’d never have to worry with the two of them supporting and loving me.

Kate glossed over the awkward time when I’d caught them in bed together and gone into crisis mode. She just told them that the three of us had decided one day we wanted to be intimate together, and that was that.

Rob asked wisely, “How do you solve your arguments ... your disagreements?”

I explained, “Saturday mornings, unless we have a crisis needing immediate attention, we sit with a cup of coffee and talk about how the week has gone for each of us, and what we’re feeling, particularly about each other. Anything that’s bothering us is put on the table. Sometimes, we can solve it right away; other times we have to do some homework about it.” Kristen squirmed into a more comfortable position in my lap.

Melissa asked, “Are you each other’s confidants and soul mates?”

Kate answered with a laugh, “Yes and no. We each have outside friends we can talk to. Joel has a professor he took some classes with named Stone Goodman. He’s older and had lived in a threesome for almost a decade about twenty years ago. Allison and I both have a few separate friends at work, and I know we vent to these other people sometimes, just as we would if we were in a traditional relationship. As for soul mates, we talked about it one time

and agreed that the term creates an unrealistic set of expectations that one or two of us can be all the things a person needs in their life – and that’s just not the case. We have a better chance with two of us being ‘soul mates’ for the third, but they’ll still need some outside relationships and stimuli.”

Rob and Melissa looked at each other. I guessed that they had recently talked about this very subject.

I said, “What we have talked about is our future, especially as Allison and I came up to graduation, and I had the opportunity to change jobs. We’ve talked about what we want this relationship to be like, how we want to change it, as we get older, and how we want to live. We have nearly identical viewpoints on all these important subjects. We talked a lot today too, while we were driving.”

Rob asked, “So what are they? Can you share with us?”

Kate spoke, “We’re going to stay around the Chapel Hill area. For the next year, we won’t move but we’ll be saving money towards the down payment on a larger house. To save on taxes, one of us might marry Joel.” She looked over where the children were playing and at Kristen sitting contentedly in my lap, and added, “And, we’re going to have children. We’ve even talked about how we’ll raise them within our extended family.”

“How’s that?” Melissa asked.

Allison picked up the thread, “Well, they’ll have two mommies and one daddy, and we’re going to make sure they see that situation as one of the most special things they have in the world compared to other kids with one mommy and one daddy.” She looked at me.

I added, “I’m going to have to work overtime to be a good dad. My role model growing up was pretty bad, but I’ve got two coaches who promise they’ll turn me into the best father in the state.” I turned with a smile to Kate and Allison.

Kate said with a smirk, “We haven’t decided when to start all this. We did talk about staggering our kids about a year apart – one from each of us – to start.” She grinned at me; I just nodded back.

Rob, who’d been quiet for a minute said, “If you share all this with Mom and Dad, it’ll soothe them down some, and make them realize this isn’t just some lusty flash you’ve had. Be sure to tell them you’ve been in this threesome eighteen months too. They’ll see some staying power in the relationship if you emphasize that.

Kate said, “Do I just blurt out, ‘Hey, I’m living in a threesome with these two people’ like I did with you?” She gestured to Allison and me.

Melissa said thoughtfully, “Sooner or later, you’re going to have to use words similar to that. You could provoke the situation a little by the three of you being overly affectionate tomorrow after you arrive at their house. I assume you can do that?”

We all laughed.

Kate’s parents lived in Lancaster, Ohio, 42 miles southeast of Westerville, where Rob and Melissa lived: Kate’s dad, Ken Neumann, worked for Anchor-Hocking Glass Company as a chemist and quality control manager; her mother, Grace, worked part-time in the town library.

The next morning, we drove down Saturday morning in two cars: Allison, Melissa, and I rode in my car; and Rob, Kate, and the three children in Melissa’s minivan. I followed Rob, who never exceeded the speed limit the entire route.

Once given the green light, Melissa asked increasingly intimate questions regarding our relationship and how we lived together, including questions about how we handled the sexual side of our relationship. Allison and I often laughed at her questions, since so many were basic to how we lived and loved that we stopped thinking about some of them.

Of course, Melissa wanted to know how the three of us made love. Did we do it together? We there always the three of us? Did we have favorites? Did I mind the Sapphic relationship between Allison and Kate? Were we still adventurous? Did we have any qualms about being with each other? I was rather shocked at how blatant some of her questions were. Finally, she confessed that she’d love to live with Rob in a relationship like ours, if they could ever find another man or woman they both loved. It was then I saw we were a fantasy relationship for her, something she could wrap some of her dreams around.

Other questions Melissa had were how we shopped for the three of us, handled finances, did chores, had hobbies, and what we felt we’d given up and gained in the triad relationship. Allison and Melissa had a long discussion about how we envisioned growing a family with three of us working. I learned a few things along the way, including how the two future mothers thought about swapping off ‘mommy duty’ as the children grew up.

Kate’s parent’s house was a modest ranch on the outskirts of Lancaster. Kate’s mother burst through the door to fully embrace her daughter, and then shower kisses and hugs on all the grandchildren. Allison and I watched with smiles from a distance as the family scene unfolded in front of us.

“It’s ashamed my parents will never know our children,” Allison ruminated in a monotone beside me. Even though many days had passed since the blow-up with her parents, Kate and I both knew that Allison was deeply hurt by their rejection and ridicule.

I pulled Allison in front of me and wrapped my arms around her. I softly said to her, “You don’t need to feel guilty for what they did to you ... and to themselves. They live in a world distant from ours, unfortunately. Someday, they might change, but for now all we can do is accept things as they are. At least your sister and you might reestablish a family connection.” I thought for a minute and then leaned around kissed her cheek: “And one more thing, I love you.” Allison smiled at me over her shoulder and twisted around and kissed me. When I looked up the rest of the family was looking at us.

Kate gestured to the two of us to join the family circle in the driveway. Kate introduced Allison and me to her parents. She reached over and held my hand tightly as she told a little about each of us, mostly reminding them of things I was sure she’d already told them. She extolled our virtues, including our recent graduations and my new job position at Health-Tronics.

As Kate finished her short introductions, her mother started to herd all of us into their home. I smiled at Kate, and we put our arms around each other and started to follow the others towards the house. We briefly kissed one another. From the corner of my eye, I saw Kate’s mother watching us carefully over her shoulder. I whispered to Kate that I loved her, and then laughed as she tickled my side where her hand rested. She laughed too, and Allison turned around and gave us both a big smile as we neared the front steps. I figured some sort of seed had been planted.

The front door to the house opened into a space between the open-plan kitchen-dining area and the living room. The grandchildren made a beeline for the television set in the living room, and a computer game that was attached to the unit. Kate’s mother, Grace, gestured for the adults to sit around the table while she got us some refreshments and started to put some fixings for lunch on the table. Kate, Allison, and Melissa moved to help shuttle things to the table from the island counter in the kitchen.

Ken asked me about Health-Tronics, and delved into the products the company had on the market and what my role for them had been as a student, and now what I’d be doing as I shifted into a full-time position for them. I’d become adept at describing the company, and Allison often accused me of trying to boost the company stock through my sales pitch. Ken seemed genuinely interested in my work, without giving the impression of a cross-examination. Rob joined in and also asked a few questions that hadn’t occurred to him the night before.

As Kate set a large bowl of potato salad on the table, she eyed me across the table and said in a jovial tease, “I hope you not going to be the kind of mate that only talks about work at family gatherings. Now that you don’t have homework, you’re going to need a hobby you can bore people with. My Dad can tell you all about his hobbies, but you’re not allowed to act bored.” She laughed aloud as she turned and walked away.

Ken watched his daughter depart and then turned to me. I put both hands in the air in a supplicating gesture. I added, “She’s right; I haven’t had time for two years for anything but studying. I’ve been thinking of going nights for a Master’s degree, but I owe myself some time. A while back I was fascinated with photography, and I thought I’d take that up again now that I can afford some decent camera equipment.”

Allison set a plate of sandwich meat on the table next to me. She gave me a warm smile, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, “And, you’re going to also have home maintenance as a hobby too.” She tousled my hair lightly and said, “You know, things like mowing lawns, cleaning out the gutters, shoveling snow, and painting. All those things they didn’t teach you about in college.”

Rob laughed, and tossed in a remark: “And that’s the short list. Wait until you have kids. Oh, and you’ll spend half your weekends putting furniture from IKEA together.” He laughed. Melissa came and hugged him; she kissed him on the cheek and said, “But you love doing puzzles, dear.” Rob rolled his eyes.

I asked Ken about his hobbies, and he started to tell me about a renewed interest in family genealogy he’d acquired from a cousin. He went on about the Pennsylvania Dutch lineage of his family. I became lost in stories about sailing ships in the seventeen hundreds, and family migrations around Europe and the north central United States. He told me so much family information was now online, all one needed was an infinite amount of time to pursue all the leads. I frequently nodded to display my interest, but Ken made giant leaps in his thinking and thus his communicating, so I became hopelessly lost. I looked at Rob, but he too had that glazed over look in his eyes.

Grace came and stood at the table with her arms crossed and looked at her husband. “Kenneth,” She said sternly, “Stop talking so much about your family, and talk about something interesting to these young men.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

He took the rebuke in stride, but the moment was fully lost as the women joined us at the table to eat. Ken said softly to us all, “We say grace before each meal. Please join hands.”

With the noise from the children’s video game in the background, Ken said a short blessing to the meal. Everyone said, “Amen,” and there was a flurry of hands reaching across the table to the various lunch and sandwich fixings.

For most of the meal, the conversation revolved around comments about the lunch, particularly the home made parts of it that Grace had obviously put a lot of work into. I recall there was also a long discussion about the benefits of organic vegetables. Inside, I was laughing to myself, because I could tell everyone at the table was dancing around anything but the questions they wanted to ask Kate.

During lunch, Allison, Kate and I made some veiled references to each other as ‘girlfriend’ or ‘boyfriend,’ without putting a whole lot of emphasis on the statements. We also often referred to ‘our’ home, once saying something about getting a larger place now that ‘we’d’ soon be able to afford it.

One by one, each of sat back having finished our sandwiches, but still at the table. Kate was on my left side and Melissa on my right next to her husband, since those seats gave them close access and visibility to the living room and their children. Ken sat at the head of the table, and to his left Grace and then Allison. A long silence eventually ensued. Kate reached over and held my hand tightly. I could tell the bomb was about to drop. I took a deep breath.

Grace looked at her daughter and said with a twinkle in the corner of her mouth, “All right, something’s going on that you need to share with us. I’m a little confused, I might add. I sense that you and Joel are serious about each other, but then I thought he and Allison were your housemates when you moved in with them months ago. What’s going on?” At least she was smiling, almost in a teasing way. Ken looked relieved that his wife had not only raised the issue, but also clarified something vague that had been puzzling him since our arrival. Melissa and Rob looked on like spectators at a tennis tournament, their heads frequently swinging back and forth in unison from person to person.

Kate smiled at her mother and said, “Right on all counts, except there’s more to say.” She paused and checked with her father, who was developing a scowl. I couldn’t tell whether he was puzzled, or had figured out the answer and was disapproving.

Kate said in her bubbly voice, but at a measured pace to be sure no words or implications were missed, “The three of us are in love with each other. We’ve lived together for about a year-and-a-half, and we’re certain this relationship has all the good things you would hope in it: love, trust, compassion, loyalty, physical attraction, intimacy, communication, sharing, high standards, respect, commitment, supporting each other in good times and bad, and, well, even a sense of spirituality to it.” As she gave her list of qualities we exhibited, I could tell she’d memorized the attributes.

Grace sat back, somewhat in shock. Ken’s scowl briefly went away as he digested what his daughter had just said. Both parent’s eyes were riveted on their daughter.

Before anyone else could comment, Kate continued in a more serious tone: “I’ve wanted to tell you since we began our relationship, but felt I should wait to be sure there was more to this than just some temporary infatuation we had with each other. I know we’ve moved beyond that now. As in any relationship, we’ve had some rocky moments and figured out how to work through them.” She paused and her mood changed back to upbeat: “This is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. Right now, I can’t imagine the rest of my life without Joel and Allison in it.”

As Kate spoke, Allison rose and walked around the table, coming to a stop between Kate and me. She knelt between us, and added her hand to where Kate and I were holding hands. The three of us looked expectantly at Kate's parents. I wondered how bad the pain would be if I got punched by her father.

A full minute of silence passed, at least at the dining room table. The sounds from the video arcade game in the living room echoed through the house. I continued to think, 'Ka-boom! Now what?'

Grace's forehead furrowed and her jaw began to oscillate, the motions presaging some question or remark. We all held our breath. She turned and looked at her son and daughter in law, and asked, "Did you know about this?"

Rob said, "Yes, and we approve. We found out yesterday." He smiled and nodded to the three of us.

Melissa added, "They're all so sweet together. I'm almost jealous of how in love they all are. I'm proud Kate's taken a road all of her own making; Joel and Allison too."

Grace turned to her daughter, "I assume you've talked out the longer-term implications of this? Where do you see this going?"

Kate spoke as Allison and I looked lovingly at her. "Yes, we've talked about every possible things you can think of. We have formal family meetings at least every Saturday morning to discuss 'us,' what's working, what we'd like to change, and where we're going." She paused and checked in with us, and then went on as we nodded encouragingly to her: "If your question implies have we talked about having more of a family, the answer is yes, we have. Soon, we'll start having children. They'll just be lucky to have to two mommies rather than just one." She turned and winked at Melissa; the two exchanged a smile.

Kate's father asked, "What about finances? How will you decide whose money buys what?"

I stepped into the fray since that was more my area of expertise. "We started with four accounts, one for each of us and then a common account we all funded equally. About a year ago, we gave up our individual accounts. We've pooled our money, and since then there have been no arguments over how we spend it. I do see some large cash outlays in the near future because we want to buy a larger house, and we'll want to nicely furnish it."

Ken said, "Do you have legal standing with each other?"

I knew what he meant, and we'd talked about it several times in the past months. I answered again, "Right now, the answer is no. We're just three individuals dealing with each other on

the basis of trust. Before we have children, we've agreed we need some kind of trust agreement to go along with wills, powers of attorney, and such, particularly provisions for guardianship of children by the others in an emergency. If something happened to one or two of us, it would provide for the others and the children. We've talked about two of us getting married and the other joining in that commitment, but, to me, it would slant the relationship in a way I don't think would be healthy in the long run."

Kate and Allison looked surprised at my observation, but nodded in agreement although we hadn't gotten that far on the marriage issue.

"Children?" Grace asked. "How many? When? By whom?"

Allison and Kate laughed. Allison said, "The first one will happen sort of by accident. The first one of us that gets pregnant will be the first one to birth. We'd wait eighteen to twenty-four months before the next one. We'd reevaluate at two to see if we want any more."

Grace turned to me and asked, "And you're all right with this; having children by two different women, I mean?" While she looked concerned, I could see softness in her eyes that I was sure meant she'd accept Kate's decision.

"Oh, yes," I said. "I can hardly wait. As most everyone knows, I had a rocky childhood so I'm going to need help being a good daddy, but I so want children. I wish we could have them now."

Melissa said, "You should see how well Joel's gotten along with our kids. They've really taken to their Uncle Joel." Almost to underscore her comments, the three year old quietly came and stood next to me. I put my arm around her and swept her up into my lap, releasing my handhold on Kate and Allison's hands. She put her head on my chest, closed her eyes, and began sucking her thumb. Nap time! Kate's parents looked rather impressed that Kristen had already adopted me.

Ken now started to get wound up with questions. The implications of all we were saying had finally sunk deeper. He said, "I have a bunch of question about this relationship, and it's the same kinds of questions I'd ask whether it was one, two, three or four of you going into a long-term relationship with my daughter: what are your plans for the future? How will you earn money to sustain the relationship? How do you know you'll keep loving each other?"

Kate started but then deferred to Allison as she spoke: "Let me answer. Joel just graduated, a feat given he's now thirty-four. He's come a long way from when I met him, and I know he's going to go a lot further. I just finished my Master's degree and he's already talking about getting his. All three of us have good, high paying professional jobs – Kate and I at the same company. As long as we manage our debt well, we'll be able to survive with only one of us working. We all have a strong work ethic and are goal driven. When we talked about

jobs, we've decided to stay in the Research Triangle Park section of North Carolina; there are so many jobs there in our fields, and it's such nice areas to live and raise children, it's hard to beat."

Allison paused and made sure she had Ken and Grace's attention, "As for how we know we'll be able to keep loving each other until we die, well, we don't. We hear about the high divorce rate in this country, but there are some things I've learned when I studied it. First, we're all in our early thirties; our odds of separating are significantly lower now than if we'd entertained this idea ten years ago. Second, Kate and I both come from homes with long-lasting marriages in it. Joel might of too, if his parents hadn't smoked themselves to death at a premature age." She paused and looked at Kate's parents; "We already think of this as a marriage. Someday, we'll do a commitment ceremony, but we already think we're in a committed long-term relationship."

Kate jumped in, "I want to add to the answer about us staying together, it's something I've noticed, but only now could put words to. There's more glue in our relationship than I think there is in many two-person relationships. I know it could go either way: one of us could think that they could pull out because there'd always be the other two left to support each other; or we're the three musketeers and no one gets to leave unless we all agree. I think, with us, it's the latter case. We've even talked about it, but not in these words."

"What do you mean?" Melissa asked, leaning forward.

Kate went on, "Well, the first six months or so we were together, and several times since then, we've asked the question about whether anyone has issues that they think will break our group apart or that make them think their being in the group is anything less than for a lifetime." She paused and looked at her parents before continuing: "Not one of us has ever had an issue they'd put in this category. In fact, to ask the question makes us think how trivial some of the other issues we've had actually are. We're in this for the long haul." The three of us held hands again, as I balanced the sleeping toddler in my lap.

As Kate talked, I watched Ken make solid eye contact with his wife. There were silent nods of acceptance that the two made to each other, instantly confirming their positions about our threesome to each other.

Ken sat erect suddenly and put both hands flat on the table in front of him, a gesture that shifted attention to him. We all turned our heads in his direction. He picked up his half-full glass of milk and said to Kate, "Grace and I are your parents and above all else we you're your happiness." He paused as he thought and said, "Further, we want to be grandparents to your children too – that's a great joy for us. So, as far as I'm concerned there's only one other thing to do, and that's to toast to the happiness and longevity of your unusual relationship."

He raised his glass and waited. Each of us picked up our glass until all seven of us held our glasses of milk, water, and cola, in front of us. Then Kate's father drank, and the rest of us followed suit. Kate's mom and dad both smiled broadly at us as we set our glasses down.

UNION

The ride back to Chapel Hill seemed to go faster although we stopped here and there to take photos and when we saw something interesting. Allison, Kate and I talked about how surprisingly receptive Kate's parents had been to the three of us living together in a love relationship. In the end, we all agreed that they 'approved' of our relationship.

I could see that Kate got her rebellious streak from both her parents. They each seemed to have a corner of their thinking that liked to flaunt authority and breach convention. While her brother seemed willing to accept things as they were, including our relationship, her parents appeared willing to push the envelope a little. I could see that we'd planted a seed in Melissa's head about breaching convention too. After a ten-year marriage to Rob, I think she was about to shake up the staid nature of their partnership.

In the course of our discussion with her parents, I realized there was some pressure for Kate, who was the same age as me – thirty-four, to start having children. Allison was nearly three years younger. Apparently, beyond thirty-five pregnancies were harder to handle and other complications were more prevalent. I tucked that information away for further use.

Tuesday, I started work in my "new" job. I remained at Health-Tronics, however, with the new degree in computer science, I moved from a technician to a full-fledged engineer in the design part of the organization. Further, I could barely believe the raise in pay, from an annualized rate of \$30,000 as a tech, to \$66,000 as a software design engineer with the potential for another ten percent as a bonus depending on company performance. There were many other perks too.

My new boss introduced me around the division I'd be working in. I already knew many of the other workers in the group, and liked all of them. They were a close-knit team and seemed to welcome my intrusion into their midst. By noon, I was deeply ensconced in an instrumentation problem on one of the heart rate monitors the company made.

Evenings, I did some financial modeling and projections, figuring out how to reestablish my financial cushion and my sense of equity with what Kate and Allison had contributed to our common fund. I'd used the entire proceeds from selling my parent's house over the two years for tuition, books, and living expenses. I also ended up with about \$10,000 in low-interest student loans.

Part of my projections also dealt with the current cost of real estate in the Chapel Hill area. I estimated the number of square feet we'd need to live comfortably compared to our current cramped quarters. I even included space for a nursery and children's rooms. Then I figured in the cost of a newer car for each of us.

As my model developed, the impact of three of us contributing to the common living expenses was obvious. Compared to others our age, we were ahead of the earning curve, even including the debt I'd incurred. When I took out one of the women's earnings from the model, we were three people living on dual incomes. The numbers still looked good. It was only when I removed both women's salaries from our family revenue that things turned dramatically downhill. If I could rebuild a cushion and payoff the loan, we'd have a family buffer of money to fall back on.

Saturday morning, I showed my financial model to Kate and Allison. Both made comments and suggestions for improving the model. I think we all knew what we were trying to do. We'd described it so eloquently to Kate's parents the weekend before when we sat around the table on Saturday afternoon.

The next six months sped by in a blur. We scrimped and saved every penny we could. Without the college expenses, I paid off half my student loan and also socked away an equal amount in our "cushion" account. The girls both contributed a large amount to the account too. Along the way, we agreed that the account would be used as a down payment on a home, and not just for emergencies. It was our large ticket item savings account.

We did Thanksgiving at Stone and Gale's home, along with another couple. The seven of us all contributed food and energy in preparing the meal. We all felt so comfortable together.

Before Thanksgiving, Allison had reached out to her sister, leaving an extensive voice mail message for her. She'd figured any halo effect from her parent's anger might have died out by then, and that Briana might be willing to engage at some level in a familiar relationship. Much to her disappointment, she never got a return call.

At Christmas, we drove up to Lancaster, Ohio, to be with Kate's parents. Rob and Melissa came down for Christmas eve and to share the presents and excitement of the children's presents with all of us. I felt so content with our stay and the open family atmosphere we shared. We stayed three days and then headed back to North Carolina for a few days of work before the New Year.

New Year's day, we had a pleasant surprise. The phone rang mid-day, and I picked it up to hear a female voice ask for Allison. I immediately thought it might be Briana. As I passed Allison the phone I mouthed my speculation to her. As she said "Hello," I heard the hesitation in her voice turn to joy as she started the first conversation with her sister in over seven months.

Kate and I got up and left the living room, so Allison could converse candidly with her sister. We tiptoed around the kitchen listening with half an ear, and speculating about the nature of the call. We heard crying and also laughter coming from the other room, so whatever was happening wasn't all bad news.

After about twenty minutes, we heard Allison end the call. She called out, “You can both come back now. Everything’s all right.”

Kate and I took our soft drinks back into the living room and rejoined Allison. I handed her a diet coke I’d poured for her. She broke into a big grin that turned into a teary grin, and said, “I’ve got my sister back.”

After a short interlude of holding and hugging, we got Allison talking about her conversation with her sister.

Allison told us, “Briana wanted to talk to me as soon as she heard about the blow-up with our parents, however, my father practically ordered her to ‘never speak to me again.’ She felt she had to let a little time pass before she reached out, plus she said she wanted to be able to truthfully answer their questions over the holiday period if they’d asked whether she’d talked to me. She wanted to be able to say ‘No’ and remain guilt free.”

Briana said that their mother was further along with the idea of forgiving the situation, so long as we were all in a loving and supportive relationship. Opposite that, she said their father still turned apoplectic every time he thought of the situation, so much that she worried he’d drive himself into a coronary or illness of some kind. He was unforgiving and not at all inclined to reestablish a relationship.

Allison said, “I told Briana that if she found a window to tell our mother that I still loved them, to take advantage of it, but not if it compromised her relationship with her mother – or parents. Of course, I spent a lot of time bring her up to date on all we’ve been doing: your new job, our plans for a house and family, and things like that.”

“Briana told me she’d changed boyfriends and was now in a more serious relationship with a guy she’d met at the wedding of one of her friends. The rest of our conversation was gossip about friends we mutually knew and things like that. She said she’d look for an opportunity to come down and see us some weekend. She promised she’d call ahead – unlike her parents.” We laughed sardonically as we all remembered the surprise visit of Allison’s parents in May.

By April, I was out of debt. I continued to drive my twelve-year-old car, fortunate that now that my schedule had become more routine, Kate Allison, and I could carpool to work. I otherwise lived modestly taking satisfaction that we were creating a stable financial platform for our family. Our savings account had swelled to over \$50,000, and I knew both Kate and Allison still had personal accounts with robust bank balances in them should we need to call in those reserves.

Spring makes North Carolina one of the prettiest places in the world. The state is a reservoir of flowering trees and shrubbery. Every flower in the world comes into bloom. It was against this beautiful background that the three of us contacted a couple of real estate agents and started our house hunting.

Our first agent accepted our living arrangement without comment. She looked intrigued, and worked with each of us independently to create a list of ‘must haves,’ and ‘nice to haves’ about whatever house we’d end up with. Later, when we compared our lists, I was pleased to see how aligned we were about what we wanted the house to be.

The following weekend we spent a full day touring houses in Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and some of nearby smaller communities. She also arranged to escort us on some house hunting closer to Research Triangle Park and in the Durham area.

Before we left, Marlyss – our agent, presented us with our lists of home requirements and asked if we wanted to make any changes now that we’d seen about ten different homes. We each shifted a few things around, mostly pressing for more space, yet for the most part our lists remained unchanged.

Monday morning, based on an idea Kate had, we each drove into the middle of the communities we’d visited and then timed our commutes to work. Traffic along Interstate 40 and some of the other roads was always heaviest this time of year, and that day proved to be no exception. We added the commute times into our emerging satisfaction index as we narrowed down the homes we were interested in.

Marlyss showed us another ten homes the following weekend, two of which were homes we’d seen the previous week and wanted to see a second time. We repeated the scenario two weekends after that, ruling out the more urbanized areas closer to Durham and Raleigh.

Every evening the three of us would sit huddled around my computer as we played with the financial model for our triad. We kept adding in expenses and moderating income, until we felt it was an accurate and conservative reflection of what our life would be like for the next five or ten years with one of the homes we’d seen.

On June first, we made an offer on a remodeled four-bedroom home just outside Chapel Hill. We sat on pins and needles awaiting the counter offer, and when it came we knew we could live with it contingent on a home inspection. The inspection went well, and on June 30th, the three of us co-signed on a mortgage.

We moved our modest assembly of belongings into the house over the July 4th weekend, barely filling any of the rooms in the spacious house. Over the next month, we discovered every furniture shop and outlet within fifty miles of Chapel Hill. We also made two trips to the IKEA furniture store in Charlotte, a hundred miles away, renting a U-Haul trailer for the

trips. Most of the furniture we bought required assembly, so the three of us all developed blisters, and then calluses, from putting together so many pieces of furniture.

After a lot of research and phone calls to narrow the field, we hired a lawyer to help us put together legal documents surrounding our unusual relationship. While the three of us couldn't legally marry, we could provide for each other and for our future children in a way that produced nearly the same result. In the end we had a six-inch stack of paper that we took turns signing and notarizing: wills, trusts, various powers of attorney, health proxies, and so forth.

We continued our Saturday morning relationship meetings over the summer. The only issues we seemed to have were getting 'established.' I think we each had a vision of what that would be like, and for some reason we initially glossed over that word. Increasingly, we talked about commitment and doing something to celebrate our relationship, at least with our family and friends.

Towards that end, the three of us decided to combine a commitment ceremony with a house warming. We decided to forego anything religious, and instead focus on the spiritual union we'd increasingly felt with each other. We set Labor Day as an appropriate date for the celebration and party, in part because Kate's parents and her brother and sister-in-law could come down for the weekend. Beyond that we started to invite everyone we knew. Allison quietly announced that she'd invited Briana, but wasn't sure whether she would come or not.

Our initial vision of the celebration quickly grew as we added in more and more elaborations to the day. As the number of people accepting passed what we estimated to be a hundred-and-fifty, we decided we'd better get a tent for the backyard. Music arrangements shifted from an iPod and speaker system to an elaborate disk jockey with hundreds of watts of audio power plus two folk singers. A few dishes of food and chips, became several buffet tables crowded with dozens of taste sensations. A few coolers with beer and wine turned into a couple of bars complete with bartenders. Taking a few snapshots of the event turned into having a professional photographer crew prowl the event with movie and still cameras. Casual attire became business casual, and then the recommended dress ultimately became known as 'wedding appropriate.'

Somehow, through all of the relatively sudden arrangements, we kept our sense of humor and our anxieties about the day remained relatively low – at least until the week of the event. We spent a couple of Saturday mornings talking about our vows, and coordinating what we'd say. We also offered Kate's brother and parents time slots in the ceremony if they wanted them. They said they did.

So that we'd avoid the peak heat of the day, we'd picked a start time of five o'clock. Shadows were starting to get long that time of year. We didn't set an end time, but we did invite the neighbors to head-off any complaints about traffic, parking, or noise.

My 'brides' looked stunning in the matching white, knee-length dresses they'd bought. Both wore small tiaras with rivulets of veil woven into their hair. I'd sprung for the first new suit in my life: a dark suit tailored to fit me like a glove. I had to say, we were the three most beautiful people at our gala.

The guests filed in, and I noted on a trip through the front yard that cars were parked on our street as far as the eye could see. Much to our amazement our living room and dining room filled with a lavish abundance of presents; I got so I was embarrassed to go through those rooms as the bounty multiplied.

Kate's relatives came early and were exceptionally helpful in smoothing out arrangements with the food and drink. They also formed an impromptu welcoming committee, steering people through the new house and into the backyard where most of the party convened.

By five-thirty, the house and tent were full of people. A buzz of conversation filled the yard, with frequent outbursts of laughter and enjoyment. Allison came up to me and latched onto my arm. Kate was close behind her. She said to me, "Come with me. I need you for a moment."

Allison led me into the house and, with Kate following, down the hall to our den. As we entered the room, Briana turned and smiled at me. "Hi Joel," She said.

"Briana," I said, "How nice you could come. I know it means a lot to Allison to have you here." Briana smiled, and I turned to Allison to see her smiling. Before anything further was said, Martha, Allison's mother came into the room. I did a double take to be sure my eyes weren't fooling me. I even peered over her shoulder to see if her father had come, but no one followed.

Allison's mother said quietly, "Hello, Joel. I've come to apologize and to be part of your celebration if that's all right with you."

I nodded acceptance of the idea. I was reticent about full acceptance, so I held my feelings in check. My last memory of her was the vitriolic noon altercation a year prior when she and her husband, Allison's father, had declared an irrevocable schism between themselves and their daughter over the life style we'd adopted.

She went on, "I've accepted what the three of you are doing, how you live, and that you love each other. For what it's worth, I've come to offer my blessings and heartfelt wishes for success and happiness – to all of you. It took me a while to get over the shock. I've learned a lot about myself over the past year or so, and I knew that rather than lose my daughter I had to move out of my comfort zone." A tear rolled down her cheek. She looked between the three of us.

Allison stood next to me and held a neutral look on her face. I expected some emotion, one way or the other, yet there was only an objective study of her mother and her words. Kate, on Allison's other side, also held a disengaged look, like a research chemist studying a surprising piece of data.

Martha continued, talking to Kate in a contrite voice, "Arnold will never come around. As I've thought about accepting the unorthodox nature of your relationship, he's moved in the opposite direction. I've talked to a few people whose opinions I value: our minister, my best friend, and of course Briana. I also read a lot on the Internet. The world's changing. The way you think is more 'right' today than my staid opinions. I accept how you live your life."

Martha looked between the three of us. She went on, "I thought Arnold and I would separate over my decision to come here today – to apologize, and ..." She choked up slightly as she tried to get the last words out. She had to stop and gather her strength to talk through her emotions; her voice cracked as she finished the sentence looking at her daughter, "... To tell you, I love you.. I hope it's all right – my being here; Briana assured me it would be all right if I came." She sniffled a little and added, "Briana told me she's even reading a poem."

Allison moved forward and embraced her mother. The two hugged. She said, "Mother, I'm glad you came, and I thank you for the effort you've made to change how you see us. I've never changed. I've always loved you and Daddy." She checked with Kate and me; we both offered up smiles of acceptance to her. Forgiveness is an interesting emotion to watch.

Kate produced a Kleenex, and after a moment of getting herself together, Allison smiled at her sister, grabbed her mother's arm, and said, "Come with me. There are about a hundred people I want to introduce you to." We all moved out of the den and back into the party.

I stayed near Allison for a few minutes to be sure everything was all right. I watched as Allison, Briana, and their mother talked with Stone and Gale. I saw the initial look of surprise on Stone's face turn to one of acceptance as though he was meeting her mother for the first time. His eyes caught mine at one point; I just shrugged and gave him an 'OK' sign.

At six o'clock, several men moved a raised podium to the center of one end of the tent. The DJ shut down his amplifier and the two folk singers took the stage. The man and woman adjusted some audio equipment to give them some light percussion, and then, after their two guitars played the introductory bars of music, the girl's crystal clear voice echoed out to the couple of hundred people that stood mesmerized suddenly by her voice. She gave a flawless rendition of 'When You Say Nothing at All,' a song Kate loved so much by Allison Krause and Union Station.

As the folk singers sang, Allison, Kate, and I approached the stage from three different directions. We gathered, arm in arm, beside the singers, bestowing kisses to one another as we formally greeted in front of our guests.

Amid applause as the first number ended, the male folk singer came to the fore and started a personalized version of 'Perhaps Love,' soon joined by his female partner as the duet went far beyond the impressive version popularized by John Denver and Placido Domingo.

Two hundred people again applauded enthusiastically at the excellence of the rendition. As the applause started to fade, the duo launched into the song I'd picked, 'How Sweet It Is To Be Loved By You,' a favorite of mine since I'd heard James Taylor record it years earlier. The song was considerably jazzier than the two preceding songs, and soon many in the tent were swaying and dancing to the music, including our triad.

As the song ended and applause again echoed around the yard, Stone Goodman mounted onto the stage as the folk singers stepped off. Stone fumbled briefly at the small box on his belt and turned on his wireless microphone. His stentorian voice silenced the lingering applause for the folk singers. "Ladies and gentlemen, Kate's parents – Ken and Grace, Kate's brother Rob and family, Allison's sister Briana her mother, thank you all for coming to help them celebrate their new home and to join with them in the celebration of their commitment to one another. I am Stone Goodman and have been lucky enough to have Joel, Allison, and Kate as my friends for the past couple of years. I've also been asked to guide this ceremony and even say these few words." He grinned at the audience.

Stone paused and looked out over the hushed crowd, and then turned to the three of us as we stood holding hands to one side of him on the small stage. He started, "About two years ago, Joel came into my class, his first college class. He was an advanced placement student, at least a decade older than my regular undergrads, claiming credit for his years of working hard and a few years of hard living." The crowd laughed with Stone. "

"Through Joel, I met the two women he had fallen in love with – Allison and Kate. The first semester I taught Joel, I'd planned to emphasize a couple of themes: live an unorthodox life, enjoy the contrasts life gives you; things are bad only if you make them so; and don't carry your past into the present."

"Never in my wildest imagination, and never in all my years of teaching, have I had a student take everyone of those lessons to heart the way Joel did – the way Joel, Kate, and Allison have. Choosing to live in a threesome is not all it's cooked up to be – I know, I lived in one for seven years. Of course, we all know there's the decadent and unbridled sex they enjoy every minute they're not in public." Stone turned to the three of us as the crowd roared with laughter. The three of us turned various shades of scarlet.

After a pause to milk the laughter from the guests, Stone continued, “What my friends have learned is that love means commitment. Commitment is a choice to give up choices, yet with it comes a new sense of freedom that didn’t exist before. Commitment is intention – intention to make the relationship work, to divide their pain, and to double their happiness. Making a relationship work between three people is a lot harder than with two.”

Stone turned to the three of us and went on, “These beautiful people have already been through a lot. They’ve had pain and drama in their lives here and there, before and after they met. As we all do, they’ll keep learning how to deal with it in a way that preserves the loving relationship this trio has built.”

Stone then gestured for Briana to come on stage and introduced her to the assembly. She climbed the risers and then faced the guests with a small piece of paper in her hand. I thought how poised she suddenly looked as her head came up and she looked out over the crowd. She said, “I wrote this over the past couple of months. I hope you like it; it’s sort of free form, so I hope Stone won’t give me a poor grade for it.” She turned and smiled at the English professor, and then began:

“No words can express how grateful I am
That you’ve gone before me through life.
You’ve softened up the ground and made
My steps easier and surer and nice.
I learned rules growing up and thought
They were all that mattered in my life,
But you showed me not to heed what I was taught,
And be happier being out of the box.
Now you’ve found lovers and made a family,
And done it in the same way you’ve
Always shown me you could.
You’ve broken a few rules and
Proven that happiness has nothing to do
With staying inside the box.
So now I have a new brother *and* sister in law,
The kind I always wanted – and one of each too.
How great you’ve paved the way,
Now I’ll know what to do too!

Briana looked up at the crowd and gave a big smile. Briana came over and hugged each of us, particularly her sister, then carefully walked off the stage to polite applause.

Stone gestured Rob, Kate’s brother up to the stage. He came up and so did Melissa and their three children. Kristen, the four year old, came right over to me, so I picked her up and gave

her a big hug. She smiled broadly at me and hugged me back. I held her in my arms so she could watch everything going on.

Rob took a hand microphone and spoke, “Kate’s always been a rebel in some ways. I guess like Allison and Joel, she’s never entirely bought into all the standard things we learn growing up – all the memes that are passed on to us. I applaud the fact that she’s fallen in love with two great people rather than only one, like the rest of us. It’ll keep her happy and content ... with a little help from Allison and Joel – at least most of the time ... some of the time ... once in a while.” He paused and everyone laughed. “You’ve been together for a couple of years and have already taught my wife and me a lot about relationships and how to make them work. We too now hold family meetings on Saturday mornings, and I feel our relationship is stronger because of it.” He looked over his shoulder and gave Melissa a big smile. She grinned back at him.

Rob paused and looked at the guests, “I’m so pleased that so many of you came to this special event. I like people that like to see how convention is broken, and my sis and her family will show us how it’s done in a loving and successful way. So on behalf of all of us in our families, we want to wish Kate, Allison and Joel the happiest of lives and our pledge of support and love if they ever need it. God be with you all.”

Rob passed the hand microphone to Stone and led the family off the stage. I set Kristen down and she followed the others.

Stone gestured for the three of us to move towards the front of the stage where we’d be more visible. Our guests moved a little closer too. Stone gestured for Kate’s parents and Allison’s mother to come up and stand with us. They did, and he carefully arranged them so we formed a nice tableau across the stage, the parents standing slightly behind us. He said, “Joel, Allison, and Kate will now say their vows to one another.”

The three of us stood in a small circle, holding hands with the other two. As we had years before, we’d drawn straws to see what order we would speak in and the order we’d covenant with each other. I went first:

“Allison, I welcome you as my lifelong partner,
To share my life openly with,
To speak truthfully and lovingly to,
To accept you as you are
To delight in whom you are becoming,
To respect your uniqueness,
To encourage your fulfillment,
And to support you through all the changes
Over our years together.
I promise you my love and commitment,

An ear for your joys, a shoulder for your tears,
And my arms for you always.
As a token of my bond, I give you this ring,
For, as a ring has no end,
So my love for you has no end.”

The three of us stopped holding hands for a moment and I reached in my right pocket to take out a ring. I slipped the narrow gold band on Allison’s ring finger. I turned and repeated the covenant to Kate, and also put a ring from my left pocket on her finger. The rings were engraved with the date and the words ‘Love Forever, Joel’ on them.

Kate did her bond next, first with Allison and then with me. She also slipped a ring on my finger, and after her oath, a second ring on Allison’s finger. Allison repeated the process, first with me and then with Kate. As we finished, we each wore two interlocking rings, engraved with in a delicate filigree and blessed with the love from the others in our triad. We each hugged and kissed the others, and then, leaned in and shared a brief three-way kiss. Everyone applauded and cheered.

The three of us moved down to the dance floor as the disk jockey put on Tony Bennett singing “As Time Goes By.” The jazzy version was perfect to dance to and soon our dancing threesome, broke apart and pulled parents, siblings, and their children onto the dance floor as people watched.

I pulled Martha, Allison’s mother, onto the dance floor with a smile. As we started to sway to the music I said to her, “Thank you for coming. Allison would have a great emptiness if you hadn’t been here.” She gave my shoulder a little squeeze; I think she couldn’t talk because she was so choked up over the ceremony and our acceptance of her apology.

As people started dancing, Allison, Kate and I clustered around a huge cake. Normally, I would have called it a wedding cake, however, we’d carefully avoided that vocabulary. It was our ‘ceremony cake.’ We cut pieces of it and carefully fed them to each other as a smaller crowd of people looked on and the photographer snapped a few dozen pictures.

As we stood there finishing our portions of cake, Kate and Allison gave me a hug. I expected them to start off into the crowd and socialize some more. Kate was her bubbly self, even more so on this occasion.

Instead, Kate said in a teasing voice, “Can I give you a special present, something you’ll remember forever, as long as you live?” Allison clutched Kate’s arm with a huge grin. I expected this might be some practical joke. Gale, Stone’s girlfriend, and several other friends stood close by watching our scene unfold. Gale knew something; she also had a big smile and appeared to be watching my reaction closely.

I said with a trace of uncertainty in my voice, “I love presents. I don’t have anything special for you though.”

Kate said in an animated voice, “Oh, you’ve already given me your present. It’s what I did with it that’s my present back to you.” Allison pulled a hand from behind her and gave a small plastic baggie to Kate; Kate in turned passed me the clear baggie.

I looked at the bag and the odd-shaped small stick inside until I suddenly realized what it was. I held it up to the light and saw that the small wand contained a bright red plus sign in the diagnostic window.

I looked up to Kate with an unasked question on my lips and a smile gradually unfolding. She nodded enthusiastically at me with a big smile. She spoke softly as she nodded, “Yes, I’m pregnant. Six to eight weeks along.”

“Oh, Kate, I love you so,” I shouted as I pulled her to me and kissed her, pulling Allison into our embrace as well. The small circle of people around us applauded. I’m sure everyone in the tent knew our news before the minute was out. Soon everyone stood and shouted their congratulations to us. The din was amazing.

As things died out, Stone walked by laughing and said in a stage whisper, “That was fast!” He grinned and continued on his way across the tent.

After we danced and danced some more, I held Kate on my lap, and Allison leaned in against the two of us holding on to one of my arms. The photographer took a picture of us that I’ll treasure forever. We were tired, but the photo captured the love, caring, devotion and contentment in each of our faces.

As we sat and watched the circle of friends buzzing around us, I reflected on the years since Allison found me in the middle of McAllister Bridge, about to end my life. That was someone else, a dark me, that I would never allow back in my life. I’d found all the things I’d wished I’d had that dark night. I’d made a new life, and now things would get even better as our family grew.

I remember thinking of the last line from a poem Robert Browning wrote a hundred-and-fifty-years earlier: “*God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world.*”

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THE END